FORGOTTEN REALMS

# MISTRESS OF THE NIGHT

THE PRIESTESS



DAVE GROSS

Forgotten Realms
The Priests: Mistress of the Night
By Don Bassingthwaithe and Dave Gross

Month of Kytkom, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR)

The black wood screens that lined the Fane of Shar on Shade Enclave had been oiled and polished over long centuries until the reflections of those who passed them flickered like specters in their ancient surface. Legends whispered among the faithful claimed that the wood of the screens came from trees that had grown in a mountain valley so deep that light touched its floor for only minutes each day, around a clearing where Shar herself had once danced alone in the shadows.

In fact, Variance Amatick knew, they had been carved by a once-famous artisan from perfectly ordinary wood and had originally graced the temple of another god entirely. An account of the looting of that rival temple and of the rededica-tion of the screens to the glory of Shar resided in the vaulted archives beneath the Fane. Variance saw no good reason to dispel the legends, though.

They served Shar at least as well as—and perhaps better than—the truth.

Variance's own dim reflection rippled along the wood of the screens as she strode through the Fane. Gray-black skin, black hair, a black mantle over black clothes embroidered in the darkest shades of purple—her reflection might have been her shadow. She might have been her shadow.

"Mistress of the Night," Variance whispered, touching the symbol she wore beneath her mantle, "guide me in what I must do."

She found the man she sought in one of the rooms that lay behind the Fane's great altar. He and the seven men and women who sat with him around a broad table littered with papers looked up in surprise as she entered. Variance bent her head.

"Rivalen Tanthul," she said humbly, "Flame of Darkness,

Singer after Twilight. Father Night, I ask your permission to leave Shade Enclave at once."
Surprise crossed Rivalen's face, momentarily furrowing skin as gray-black as Variance's own. The others at the table—two of them shadow-skinned as well, but the rest pale humans—glanced at the high priest. He gestured in dismissal and they rose silently and without question to file out of the room. When the last of them had closed the door, Rivalen rose and waved Variance to one of the vacated chairs.
"You wouldn't interrupt me without serious cause, vigilant sister," he said. His voice was rich, but not displeased. "And I know you wouldn't seek to leave your charge unless the cause was even more serious. What's wrong?"
Variance stepped forward, but didn't sit down. She drew a deep breath. "At the time of the fall of Netheril," she said, "there existed in the town of Sepulcher a remarkable temple to Shar."
"The House of Mystery," said Rivalen. "I remember it." He seated himself and leaned forward, fingers steepled under his chin, to look at her intently. "What about it?"
"Among the mysteries within the House, there was reputed to be an ancient text, The Leaves of One Night."
Rivalen's eyebrows rose. "I've never heard of it."
A trace of irritation had entered his voice. Variance inclined her head. She waited. After a moment, the high priest bent his head in turn.
"The Dark Goddess does not surrender her secrets lightly," he said. "Vigilant sister, I am rebuked." He smiled thinly and abandoned formality. "What of this text?"
Variance spread her hands and said, "It was lost—like so much of the empire while our city sheltered in the Plane of Shadow. It is referred to only sparingly in our own archives and not at all outside of them. I had thought it vanished for all time, if it was real at all."
"But it is real, isn't it?" Rivalen guessed. His smile grew wide

and genuine. "And it has been found?"
"I... I hear it," said Variance. "Here—" she touched her temple, then the symbol of Shar under her mantle—"and here. The Mistress of the Night wishes that what once was lost be returned to her possession."
"It will be." Rivalen stood up. "What do you need?"
"Nothing." She lifted her mantle to reveal a satchel of black leather, packed for a journey. "Except your permission to leave Shade."
"You have it."
Rivalen stepped around the table and laid his right hand on her head. His fingers were cool. Within them, Variance could feel the even colder touch of the goddess.
"Shar bless you," the high priest intoned, "vigilant sister, keeper of secrets, and recorder of doctrine." He lifted his hand. "Be subtle, Variance."
"Always, Father Night."
Variance bowed her head to him once more, then turned and left quickly. Outside, the men and women who had been speaking with Rivalen were still waiting. They bowed to her as she passed. Variance ignored them. She swept back out through the Fane, past the great altar of Shar, and past the black wood screens.
The acolytes tending the doors of the Fane pulled them open in respectful silence as she approached. She stepped through.
The flying city of Shade, last enclave of an empire that fell out of Faerun's history seventeen hundred years before, spread out below her. Overhead, eternal shadow churned in black clouds, a reminder of the dark dimension that had given sanctuary to the city during—and for centuries after—the cataclysm that had laid Netheril low.
And that had given birth to the powers within her.
Variance took a step forward. Shadows wrapped around and through her, sliding into the shadowstuff that took the place of her flesh and soul. She stepped out of another shadow

hundreds of yards along the street. Two human Shadovar dipped their pale faces to the dark shade suddenly standing beside them, but Variance walked on. A few long strides carried her to the very edge of Shade. Scant feet away, the ground dropped off. It was a long fall from the floating city to the soil of Faerun.

The shadows that wrapped the city were thinner at its edge. Stars glinted among the strands of darkness—stars and the silver-white radiance of a gibbous moon, waning but still bright. Variance clenched her teeth at the hated light and stepped back into deeper shadows. Calling to mind the location that Shar had revealed to her, the city to the south and west where The Leaves of One Night waited, she wove the shadows tight around herself and vanished into darkness.

Dhauna Myritar's eyes snapped open. Her body jerked and she sat upright, sucking air into her lungs in painful, wracking gulps. She stared around the dimness of her bedchamber. For a moment, everything seemed preternaturally clear as her mind and body struggled for unity, then the hazy nausea of interrupted sleep swam over her. Dhauna shook her head, trying to clear it of the terror that had awakened her. She only succeeded in making her stomach churn. She sat back, propping herself against the headboard, and forced herself to breathe slowly.

A nightmare, a part of her mind urged her, it was only a nightmare. Lie down. Go back to sleep. You've already forgotten what happened in the dream, haven't you? By morning, you'll have forgotten you dreamed at all.

"But it's not always 'just a dream,' is it?" Dhauna muttered. "Not always."

The high priestess of Selune reached down and untwined the bed sheets—damp with sweat born from another stifling summer night in the Sembian city of Yhaunn—that wrapped around her like a shroud, and swung her legs over the side of the bed. There was a robe of clean white linen on a chair

next to it. She wrapped the robe around herself, then stretched to reach her canes. Bracing them against the floor with one hand she levered her old body up off the bed, then stood still for a moment and steadied herself. When she felt balanced, she wobbled carefully across the bedchamber and out into her sitting room.

Moonlight slanted through the many panes of the big window in the south wall. Selune's celestial face was a waning gibbous tonight and at that hour, well past its zenith. Was that an omen, Dhauna wondered, a nightmare just as the moon entered its period of descent? She grunted. She was just imagining things.

She continued walking. The door of her sitting room opened into the hall outside, where sconces of frosted glass glowed with pale magical light. Dhauna shuffled her canes with care. Julith's room was next to hers and her secretary could hear a quill fall. No sound came from behind Julith's door, though. She was fast asleep.

To reach the head of the ramp that led down to the ground floor of Moonshadow Hall, Dhauna had to walk almost a quarter of the way around the temple. Under her breath, she cursed whatever ancient architect had decided that the high priestess's rooms should lie farthest from the head of the ramp. Maybe the idea had been, as

Julith often argued, to allow the head of the temple some peace and quiet rather than having novices and junior priests and priestesses continually tromping past her door. That was a stupid idea, Dhauna thought. The novice and junior clergy were young. They should be the ones walking the farthest!

She focused on getting along the corridor then down the long ramp, turning each slow step into a meditation, trying to remember her nightmare. There didn't seem to be much to remember, only her terror. There was something to be frightened of, she was sure of that, but just what... she couldn't remember. Even her terror was fading away, leaving

her only with a vague sense of unease.
At the bottom of the ramp she turned, stepping through a door and out into the cloister around the temple's central courtyard. A night breeze tugged at her robe and wrapped its hem around one of her canes. Dhauna paused and shook the fabric free. The waning gibbous gate was only a few shuffling paces farther. With a small sigh of relief, she stepped through the gate and into the courtyard. The dew-cool grass was soft under her feet and much more pleasant to walk on than hard stone. She stood for a moment, digging her toes into the grass—and realized for the first time that she had forgotten to pull on her slippers. Had the nightmare really disturbed her so much?
Walking with more care, she made her way down the courtyard to the sacred pool and the low stone wall that surrounded it. Selune's light entered the courtyard at a sharp angle, but as long as some light entered the courtyard, the moon was reflected in the still water. Dhauna sought out a patch of moonlight, settled herself sideways on stones that had been worn smooth by countless clerical hands and backsides, and stared into the water. Silhouetted by the moon, her reflection stared back at her. Dhauna closed her eyes, reaching deep within herself for the fleeting memories of her dream. They eluded her like fireflies, leading her on with flickers and flashes, only to vanish, leaving her lost in darkness. Dhauna ground her teeth in frustration and strained, trying hard to remember what had frightened her into waking.
Moonmaiden guide me, she prayed silently. Help me remember-More quickly than she could have thought, she brushed against a memory and a dread she couldn't name or even comprehend filled her. An old horror. So very, very old—but close as well. Very close. Her chest clenched and a thick bitterness choked her. She forced her eyes open.
She was staring up at the moon, Selune's light falling full across her face. The memory—whatever it had been—was

gone again. But there was a new, dreadful certainty in her belly.
"You sent it," she whispered to the moon. "You gave me a warning. But of what? Of what?"
Her last word came out as a shout. Dhauna clapped a hand over her mouth, but it was too late. The windows of the temple's bedchambers overlooked the courtyard, and at Julith's window there was a flash of light. Dhauna muttered a curse. She wouldn't be alone for long.
The danger was close. But where? Within Yhaunn? Within Moonshadow Hall? A sharp ache throbbed in Dhauna's head as .she struggled with the question. If the danger was so close, she needed help. Someone she could trust.
Julith's footsteps echoed on the flagstones of the cloister.
Dhauna dipped her hand in the sacred pool. "In the name of the Bright Lady, hear me," she prayed softly, "Feena of Arch Wood, daughter of Maleva, come to me!"
A single ripple shimmered across the surface of the water as her prayer took flight.
"High Moonmistress?" called Julith. "Is something wrong? Are you all right?"
Dhauna turned to see the young priestess hurrying across the grass. She smiled and shook the water of the pool from her hand.
"Nothing's wrong, Julith," she lied. "I'm fine."
Two Sisters
From the shadows of chaos, two sisters are born, One bright Selune, the other dark Shar. A harmonious balance soon to be torn When Selune gifts life with flame from afar!
At the dawn of the world, two sisters contest Over dark, over light, over life, over death. Shar seeks the void and with shadows coalesced Snuffs Selune's bright lights and with them her breath!
In the twilight of battle, one sister falters, But Selune hurls magic in desperate power. From two sisters, one child the balance alters— Mystryl's aid to Selune ends Shar's dark

hour!
Selune, Moonmaiden—Shar, Mistress of Night, Two sisters divided by one sister's spite.
—composed by Veseene the Lark Presented to Dhauna Myritar of Moonshadow Hall in the Year of the Turret (1360 DR)

## CHAPTER 1

Month of Eleasias, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR)
The little clearing beside the road to Ordulin just outside of Yhaunn was quiet except for the sluggish gurgle of a summer-warmed stream. All was still'but for the slow dance of leaves stirred by an evening breeze. Quiet. Still. Peaceful. Even so, the wolf that squatted in the twilight shadows at the edge of the clearing waited a few minutes more—a lesson of caution learned the hard way—before stepping out into the open. Between its jaws, it clenched the loop of a strap that bound a tight bundle of rags. The animal dropped the. bundle beside the stream, then sat back and with a silvery jingling of the chain collar that circled its neck, shook itself.
With every shake, the wolfs russet pelt grew shorter, except at its head where a mane of red hair billowed free. Canine features flattened and smoothed as limbs grew long—and human. The change took only moments.
Feena rose up on two feet, naked except for the chain she wore. Out of reflex, she put a hand to her throat checking to see that the medallion hanging from the chain had survived her journey. It had, of course. Battered and scratched, the disk of silver that bore Selune's symbol of bright eyes and seven stars seemed able to survive anything even a werewolf could throw at it.
She hoped it would survive what she was going to face in Yhaunn.
"It's been a busy month, High Moonmistress," she said, rehearsing the excuse one more time as she reached for her bundle. "I couldn't come any sooner. Two of the village

women were pregnant, then one had a difficult birth and the baby was sickly—I had to watch over him, Mother Dhauna."
The strap around the bundle had slipped tight. She picked at it in frustration until it opened and her clothes spilled out onto the ground: light sandals, a simple blue skirt of homespun wool, and a blouse of linen dyed yellow with yarrow. Feena shook the dirt out of the skirt and pulled it on.
"What was wrong with him? A twisted leg, Mother Dhauna—and jaundiced, too, the poor little thing!" She bit a corner of her lip as she cinched the drawstring of the skirt tight around her waist. Was the excuse too much? "Maybe just the twisted leg," she muttered.
"There's nothing twisted about your legs, missus, not from where I'm standing!"
Feena snatched up her blouse and spun around. At the edge of the clearing, two men emerged from the trees. One carried a short sword, the other a heavy club. Neither looked particularly honest. Both wore unpleasant leers.
"See, Stag, I told you I heard a jingling like silver! I'm never wrong about that!" said the man with the club.
He pointed his weapon at her—specifically at her chain and medallion. Feena twitched her blouse up to cover both the medallion and herself.
"Oh, now don't do that, missus," Stag said as he slid forward. The other man circled to her far side. "Drik and I were just enjoying the scenery. Pretty clearing this, isn't it? Favorite stop for travelers. Not sure why you'd want to take your clothes off, but I'm not complaining.''
Feena cursed herself. The bandits had come from downwind—she'd missed their scent entirely—and she'd been too caught up in practicing her excuses to notice their approach.
"Stay back," she warned them, taking a step back herself to keep both men in view.
Stag chuckled, "Don't be frightened, red bird. We'll take what we want and if you behave yourself, you won't get-"

Feena's toes found the straps of one of her sandals. With a snap of her leg, she sent her footwear flashing at Stag's face. The bandit's sword swooped to swat it aside, but Feena was already spinning around, shifting her balance and driving her other foot hard into Drik's belly. His breath whooshed out of him and he staggered back, doubled over. Feena stepped clear, thrust her arms into the sleeves of her blouse, and jerked it on.

"—hurt?" she asked Stag. "Is that what you were trying to say?"

The swordsman growled, a pitiful sound, and charged at her. Feena met his charge with a rush of her own, throwing herself down at the last moment to knock his legs out from under him. Stag fell flat on his face and went skidding along the ground. Feena rose to confront Drik. The bandit looked pained, but he was upright again. He swung his club at her.

Feena ducked under his swing and grabbed his opposite shoulder, twisting him around with the force of his own blow. His arm came around again and she plucked the club out of his hand and drove it sharply into his already tender belly. When he doubled over, she brought it down hard against the back of his head. Drik sprawled bonelessly across the ground.

"Nice moves, missus," Stag said. He was back on his feet, his face streaked comically with dirt and grass stains. His sword, however, was held low and menacing. "Got any more?"

"Yes," said Feena. The fingers of her left hand touched her medallion while the fingers of her right stabbed at Stag. "Bright Lady of Night, stay his hand!"

Like moonlight itself, the cool power of Selune flooded through her, drawn by her faith and shaped by her prayer. Feena felt rather than saw the magic that reached out and wrapped around the bandit—freezing him in place. Feena walked up to him and stared into his startled eyes. She hefted Drik's club. Stag's eyes turned frightened and pleading. Feena shrugged.

"It is a pretty clearing, isn't it?" she said.
She slammed the club into Stag's head. Stag went down to join Drik in the dirt. Feena looked down at the bandit, then kicked his unconscious form.
"Don't you have any—" she spat, delivering another kick —"respect—"
A third kick.
"-for the clergy?"
Feena snatched up his sword and hurled both it and Drik's club away into the bushes, then found her sandals and pulled them on. She pushed a stray lock of hair out of her face and turned back toward the road and Yhaunn.
"Moonmaiden's grace," she cursed, "I hate the city!"
Yhaunn had begun life centuries ago as a cluster of crude cabins caught between the quarry where workers hewed out great slabs of granite and the docks where they shipped them out to cities around the Sea of Fallen Stars. Many great buildings in Selgaunt, Saerloon, Westgate, and Alaghon—even far off Cimbar in Ches-senta and Velprintalar in Aglarond—had been built with Yhauntan stone. By the time the quarry was played out, Yhaunn had become a city in its own right. Its buildings had spilled out of the narrow strip along the bay and right into the old quarry itself, with the city's wealthier citizens building higher and higher onto the quarry walls until habitations filled the rocky basin.
In the gathering night, Yhaunn was filled with shadows. Feena stood at the city gates high atop the old quarry cliffs and stared down at the tightly-crowded bowl of the city. Selune had risen and her silver light fell over Feena's shoulders, illuminating the streets of Yhaunn but casting darkness between the buildings. Feena's hand reached for her medallion, but she stopped it and lifted her chin. It's no different than a forest at night, she told herself. A big stone forest.
With no trees and a lot of people. She swallowed.
"Never been to the city before, country wife?" laughed one

of the guards at the gate. "Best keep a tight hand on your purse!"
Feena glared at him and started down into the city.
Even among all the buildings, Moonshadow Hall stood out, both from the heights of the city and from street level. The temple of Selune was a big, round structure that shimmered pale gray in the moonlight, a counterpoint to the full moon rising into the sky. Depicted in tall relief on the temple's walls were Sehlne's seven Shards, the goddess' winged servants and warriors. Together with sculpted owls, the Shards stood guard over the many gates that stood along the temple's outer walls. Only one of the outer gates was real, though. The rest were merely symbols of the true gates that represented the phases of the moon around Moonshadow Hall's sacred inner courtyard.
Feena strode up to the main entry gate and the acolyte who stood guard at it. She couldn't have been more than fourteen years old and the blue and silver robes that she wore fit her awkwardly. A mace, its head etched with a crescent moon, hung from a belt around her thin hips. Feena wondered if she could actually use it. As she approached, the girl glanced at her idly, looked away, then looked back as she realized that the woman in homespun and linen wore the same symbol she did.
"Welcome to Moonshadow Hall, sister," the girl said in greeting. She sounded as if she didn't quite know what to make of the rough woman in front of her, but Feena had to admit that even so she managed to force a pleasant, welcoming note into her voice. "Is this your first visit to the hall?"
Feena couldn't suppress a slight twitch. "No," she said, "it isn't. But-"
"Feena?" called a voice from within the gate. "Feena, is that you? By Our Silver Lady, I knew you couldn't stay away from me forever!"
A man came bounding out of the temple, a pale blue half-

cape flowing behind him, and swept her up in his arms. Feena forced herself to smile and accept his embrace, but she gripped his arms the instant she felt his hands slide toward her bottom.

She pressed her cheek to his and whispered in his ear, "I wouldn't like to thump you in front of the girl, Mifano."

Mifano kissed her cheek and laughed, his hands moving back to a more brotherly position. His breath smelled of cloves and cinnamon.

"Ah, Feena, silver flame of the immortal moon—how my heart has missed the blunt impact of your wit." He turned to the acolyte and said, "Jhezzail, this is Feena. We trained together here when we were younger than you."

Feena saw the acolytes' eyes widen at the introduction, but once again it seemed that the girl managed to hold her composure. She bent slightly and dipped her head.

"Elder sister," she murmured formally.

"Younger sister," replied Feena, bowing her head in return. As Mifano took her arm and escorted her through the gate, she muttered, "I see my reputation is intact."

"You were a... unique novice, Feena. Not many clergy of Selune are blessed the way that you are."

"Not many would consider being a werewolf a.blessing," Feena snorted, "even among Selune's clergy. Remember, my mother sent me here to learn how to control that 'gift' as much as to be initiated into Selune's mysteries."

"Not that you needed much initiation, as I recall." "My mother taught me well."

Mifano fell silent for a moment, then said quietly, "We were all sorry to hear about your mother's death. In spite of her choices, she was an example to us all."

Feena looked at him out of the corner of her eye. Though he was no older than her own almost thirty years, when he chose to be serious Mifano seemed to age into sudden maturity. Maybe it was because he always played the role of the flirt that he usually seemed younger. Maybe it was

because his prematurely silver hair that some claimed was a mark of Selune's favor lent him a strange sense of agelessness. Either way, she could in that moment see how the man she remembered as a clownish adolescent could have risen to prominence as a priest.

"Thank you," she said. She let the awkward silence drift for a heartbeat longer, then cleared her throat and added, "I hear that you've been making a reputation for yourself as well."

"I've taken on some extra duties at Moonshadow Hall" Mifano said with mock humility.

He gave a casual shrug that shifted his half-cape back behind his left shoulder, exposing the sword that rode on his hip. Feena's eyebrows rose at the sight of the weapon. The hilt that curled out of the scabbard was forged from bright steel, decorated with silver and mother-of-pearl, and marked with a crescent inside the circle of a full moon. Mifano's smile grew wide.

"Why, Feena," he asked suggestively, "are you staring at my sword?"

"Give it up, Mifano." She pointed at the sword and asked, "Is that really the Waxing Crescent?"

He grinned and nodded. Feena whistled. The sword was an artifact of Moonshadow Hall, traditionally given as a symbol of office to the priest or priestess who represented the business of the Hall in the city at large. It was a high honor and one of the most powerful positions within the temple.

"You have made a reputation for yourself! But I've never seen the Waxing Crescent carried outside of ceremonies before."

"Why shouldn't I carry it? It's a badge of honor and a fine weapon." He stroked the hilt. "And other than you apparently, women love—"

Feena wrinkled her nose. "I get the point," she said as they stepped through another set of doors and into the cloisters around the temple courtyard. "So if you hold the Waxing Crescent, who holds the Waning Crescent?"

Mifano grimaced and flicked a finger along the open air passage.
Coming along the cloister toward them was a small cluster of priestesses. In the lead, issuing instructions as she walked, was a tall woman with soft brown hair that fell to her shoulders. On her belt hung the sword that was the twin to Mifano's: the Waning Crescent, symbol of administrative authority within Moonshadow Hall. She looked up and met Feena's gaze.
Feena suppressed a scowl and said, "Well met, Velsinore."
Velsinore looked as though she was choking back similar distaste but answered, "Well met, Feena."
Velsinore murmured something to two of the three women following her and they scurried away, leaving one to trail in Velsinore's wake as she paced forward. With every step, the Waning Crescent slapped against Velsinore's leg and Feena wondered why she even bothered to wear it. Then she saw the look of hostility that passed between Velsinore and Mifano and understood.
She wears her sword because he wears his, thought Feena. Moonmaiden's grace, whatever else Dhauna wants me for, I've arrived in the middle of a power struggle!
"I was looking for you earlier," Velsinore told Mifano. "I had assumed you were out in the city pursuing one of your dalliances in lieu of your duties."
"My 'dalliances' are part of my duties," Mifano replied. His voice was as smooth as oil. "Or perhaps you'd prefer to see the cupboard bare as donations fall. But I wasn't dallying. Not outside of Moonshadow Hall at least."
He slipped his hand around Feena's arm. The visiting priestess jerked free and gave Mifano a scowl as Velsinore turned her attention back to her.
"Mifano met me at the gate and escorted me here," Feena explained.
"I'm sure he did," Velsinore murmured as she looked Feena up and down, examining her country skirt and blouse. Feena

flushed. The tall priestess wasn't dressed quite so fancifully as Mifano—she wore a simple high-collared robe of dove gray. The very simplicity of the robe, however, spoke of sophistication and authority. Feena's clothes, on the other hand, spoke of dirt, labor, and the country. A long crust of wolf spittle stained her skirt. She must have drooled during her travels. Angry, she wiped at the stain.

Velsinore's smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "So you've returned to Moonshadow Hall. Have you given up your mother's vendetta against the servants of Malar?"

Feena flushed even deeper and said, "Do you mean 'have I stopped defending Arch Wood village against the predators of the Beastlord to fight the shadowy minions of Shar because Shar should be the only enemy that really matters to a priestess of Selune?'"

"When you put it that way," said Velsinore, "yes."

"No."

"Ah," Velsinore said as she folded her hands. "Then why have you come back? I imagine Mifano was too busy flirting with you to ask."

Mifano's eyes narrowed. "I was offering her hospitality."

"Which is my responsibility," said Velsinore. She glanced at Feena. "We have space in the acolyte's common room, of course. You're welcome to it."

"I don't think I'll be staying," Feena growled—at both of them. "I'm only here because Dhauna Myritar sent for me."

Both Mifano and Velsinore stared at her. "She sent for you?" asked Velsinore. "A prayer carried on the Moonmaiden's beams," said Feena. She crossed her arms. "Do you doubt me?"

Velsinore and Mifano exchanged a glance, then Mifano looked back to Feena and asked, "When?"

Feena bit her tongue. "Recently," she said, evading. "Where is she? I'll talk to her and be on my way."

"In her quarters, preparing for the Full Moon Blessing," Velsinore told her. She seemed to hesitate for a moment,

then gestured for the priestess who had remained with her. "Tam, take Feena to the High Moonmistress."
Feena froze the younger priestess with a glare and said, "I know how to get there."
She strode off along the cloister, leaving the startled priestess in her wake. A heartbeat later, rapid footsteps followed her.
"Feena!" called Mifano. "Wait!"
"Why?" Feena swung through another door and back into the interior of the temple. The ramp that led up to the second floor and the high priestess's quarters was just beyond.
Mifano caught her hand. "You should know," he said hastily. "Dhauna has... things have changed at Moonshadow Hall. They're complicated."
Feena pulled away. "Things never change," she said. "They're always... complicated."
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Feena raised her hand to knock on the carved wood of the High Moonmistress's quarters and was suddenly reminded of a precocious fifteen-year-old acolyte summoned before the high priestess of Moonshadow Hall for pummeling a silver:haired boy who had presented her with a collar and leash. She forced the memory aside. Some things did change. She rapped on the wood.
When there was no immediate response, she knocked again.
"Mother Dhauna, it's—"
The door opened partway before she could finish. A young, dark-haired priestess peered out. She wore a harried expression.
"Please," she said quickly, "this isn't a good time. Can you come back later?"
Feena blinked. "I'd rather-"
"Feena?" Dhauna's voice rose from somewhere inside. "Feena, is that you?"
The dark-haired woman winced, but Feena raised her voice

and called back, "It's me, Mother Dhauna!"
"By Our Silver Lady!" The high priestess's voice was shrill and excited. "Finally! Let her in, Julith! Let her in!"
The dark-haired woman—Julith—sighed and swung the door wide. "She's in her bedchamber," she whispered. "Please, try to keep her calm."
Feena looked at Julith, but the other woman was already turning away. Feena stepped inside and shut the door. Dhauna's sitting room was cluttered with stacks of books and bundles of scrolls. Papers hid the desk. She stared at the mess in surprise as she passed on into the bedchamber.
"Feena!" Seated in a chair before a dressing table, Dhauna Myritar twisted around to greet her.
Feena only barely managed to bend in respect. Somehow, it seemed, her muscles had forgotten how to move and her eyes had forgotten how to blink.
The High Moonmistress of Moonshadow Hall was all but lost within the silver lace and blue silk of her vestments, her head and face overshadowed by a high, stiff collar. For as long as Feena had known her, Dhauna had been a cheerfully plump priestess often mistaken for a woman twenty years younger than her actual age. But no one would underestimate the woman's age again. Her brown skin had faded to the color of crumpled parchment, and her dark gray eyes had lost their luster. She was not merely thin, but so gaunt that her gown was loose on her wasted frame.
"Mother Dhauna..." Feena murmured in shock.
"Oh, stand up!" Dhauna's gesture was sharp, making her irritation plain. "It's the vestments. They make me look like a starving dwarf. Life waxes, life wanes—time
catches us all, eventually." She swatted at Julith's hands as the priestess attempted to brush her fine, white hair. "It looks fine, Julith!" Her eyes focused on Feena again. "You took your time."
Feena finally blinked and fumbled for the excuse she had spent so long fussing over. The shock of the changes in the

high priestess had her shaken. Was that what Mifano had been trying to warn her about?
"I couldn't come any sooner* High Moonmistress," she managed. "It's been a busy month. Two of the village women were..." Her carefully rehearsed words began to slip away from her. She clutched at them desperately, "...were sick. And one was pregnant with a difficult boy."
Dhauna grinned and replied, "In my experience, all boys are difficult."
"He had a jaundiced leg," said Feena hastily. She grimaced as soon as the words were out of her mouth.
"And the rest of him?" asked Dhauna.
"Twisted," Feena said.
Dhauna laughed.
Julith stood behind the high priestess, a simple circlet of silver bearing the disk of the full moon in her hands, staring open-mouthed at their exchange. Dhauna stretched around and glanced at the circlet.
"Not that one," she ordered. "The moon's road tiara! You know that!"
"But Mother Dhauna-"
"The tiara!" As Julith laid down the circlet, Dhauna turned back to Feena. "Why didn't you come, Feena? The truth this time."
Feena looked down at her feet. Above the soles of her sandals, they were very dirty.
"I didn't want to face Moonshadow Hall and Yhaunn again," she confessed. She glanced up. "You know I don't belong here."
"You're happier in the fields and woods, I know. It's your nature, just as it was your mother's nature. Even more so, I suppose." Dhauna winced as Julith set an
ornate confection of a tiara—six crescent moons surrounding a full moon—on her head. The white puff of her hair sank under the weight and Julith reached for a comb to fix it in place. Dhauna ignored her, keeping her gaze on Feena. "But

I called for you, Feena." A pleading tone entered her voice. "I called for you at every turning of Selune's face."
"I know," said Feena. "I heard every call."
"Then why didn't you come?"
"I couldn't just drop everything and abandon my village!" Feena protested. "The people do need me."
"I know that! I gave you time," Dhauna's voice rose in accusation.
Feena's rose as well. "Eventually!"
"When I realized you weren't going to come quickly enough."
" 'Be here for the full moon of Eleasias,' you said." Feena spread her arms. "Here I am!"
"Just barely! Ow!" The High Moonmistress let out a shriek. She clapped one hand to her head and whirled around in a cascade of silk and lace to snap at Julith. "What are you doing?"
The young priestess stood with the tiara in one hand the comb in the other, and a look of dismay on her pale face. "The moon's road tiara is too heavy, Mother Dhauna. Your hair's too fine to support it, even with a comb—"
Dhauna's face twisted and her eyes came back to life with sudden rage. "Then give me the full moon circlet, you stupid girl!"
Silence fell over the bedchamber like a shroud. Julith's eyes went wide and Feena was certain that she saw her hands tremble. There must have been surprise on her own face as well. Dhauna stared for a moment—then seemed to crumble. "Julith," she whispered, "I'm sorry." She gestured with withered fingers. "Please—go on ahead to the courtyard. Feena will help me finish and walk with me to the Full Moon Blessing." She looked over her shoulder at Feena and asked, "Won't you?"
Feena nodded. "Of course."
Julith set the moon's road tiara on the dressing table and bent deeply to the high priestess, then fled the room.

Dhauna sat back with a sigh. Feena stepped up to her cautiously. More had changed about the High Moonmistress than just her wasting body.
"Mother Dhauna," Feena asked, "are you all right?"
"No, Feena, I'm not," Dhauna replied, sitting up again. "There's not much time before the ceremony." She pointed to the dressing table. "If you could help me...."
Feena picked up the lighter circlet and settled it over the high priestess's hair. Dhauna looked at herself in the mirror that hung over the table.
"Good enough."
"Why did you call me here, Mother Dhauna?" asked Feena. "What's wrong?"
In the mirror, Dhauna's eyes shifted to look at her. "Selune has been sending me dreams, Feena." She looked at the mirror again. "Though it seems that the Moon-maiden measures her sendings by the strength of my faith rather than the strength of my body."
Feena knelt beside the wizened priestess's chair. "What are these dreams?"
"Warnings," Dhauna said as she wrapped her hand around Feena's. "Impending danger—great danger—from within the faith, I think. Possibly even from within Moonshadow Hall." She smiled at Feena's look of alarm. "Or so I have come to believe. The wisdom of gods is a mystery to mortals. I'm still searching for the deeper meaning of the dreams."
"The books in your sitting room," said Feena.
Dhauna nodded and said, "Guidance from those who came before us. The books come from the archives. I have even more spread out there. I don't believe I've read so much in my entire life."
"What have you found?"
"Nothing yet. Scraps. Clues." She released Feena's hand and brushed fingers through Feena's hair. Feena could smell old parchment and fresh ink on them. "Julith helps
ne. I couldn't hide the dreams from her for long. But if ;he

danger is within Moonshadow Hall, I need help from lomeone outside the hall. Someone I can trust. Someone vho isn't afraid of controversy."
Feena closed her eyes and said, "I should have come looner." "It would have been better if you had," said Dhauna. Will you help me?" "Yes."
"Thank you." Dhauna's hand rested briefly on Feena's lead in a blessing gesture—then the high priestess ighed and struggled to sit upright. "Though I think the irst thing you could help me with is getting out of this hair!"
The High Moonmistress's ornate vestments were beau-iful and in times past Feena had known her to wear hem as easily and as casually as an old shawl. She found terself holding billows and bustles out of the way as )hauna eased herself out of the chair and reached for a wir of canes. Feena took one from her and offered the old triestess her arm instead. Dhauna accepted it gratefully. Pheir progress along the corridor outside her quarters md down the ramp to the temple's ground floor was still low, however. Just inside the door that led out to the loisters and the temple courtyard, Dhauna paused, her lead bowed for a moment in prayer, and Feena sensed the [ivine surge of the goddess's touch. Dhauna breathed a igh. Releasing Feena's arm and shifting her grip on her ane, she stood solidly on her own two feet.
"For ceremonies only," she told Feena with a smile. Such is the price of vanity."
She strode through the door a little awkwardly, but rith renewed strength. Feena followed in her wake.
Outside, the temple courtyard was filled with the lergy and novices of Moonshadow Hall, as well as with hose citizens of Yhaunn who paid honor to Selune. )hauna circled around the cloister to the full moon ate. During the day, the courtyard could be entered reely through any of the seven open gates that led into
it, but tradition dictated that by night only the gate corresponding to the phase of the moon could be used—and

since the closed gate of the new moon was nothing more than a brick-filled arch, the courtyard was never entered during the dark of the moon. Feena remembered youthful frustration at being forced to walk all the way around the cloisters when cutting across the shadowed courtyard would have saved her precious time. Having grown older, she found the walk strangely comforting, a moment of contemplative transition between outside world and sacred ceremony.

As Dhauna stepped through the full moon gate, clergy and worshipers parted before her, making a wide aisle across the moonlit grass to the sacred pool at the courtyard's far end. The High Moonmistress proceeded down the grassy aisle at a stately, measured pace. On either side, men and women bent in respect as she passed:

Feena, however, stopped just inside the gate. Julith stood at the back of the crowd, and Feena slipped in beside her.

"I'm sorry for what happened in Dhauna's bedchamber," Feena whispered.

The young priestess sighed and shrugged. "I'm getting used to it," she murmured back. "Some days she's better than others."

Her eyes were fixed on the other end of the courtyard. Dhauna had set aside her cane and was standing in front of the sacred pool, her back to the crowd. Overhead, the moon was almost perfectly aligned with the courtyard, the high priestess, and the pool. Dhauna raised her hands. "Selune," she called, "Moonmaiden, Bright Lady of Night, Our Lady of Silver—tonight we honor your fullest aspect and pray for your blessing of strength..."

As Dhauna continued her invocation, Feena leaned in closer to Julith.

"Some days?" she whispered. "Getting used to it?" She pressed her lips together, then asked, "The dreams?"

Julith started, then nodded.

Selune's warnings were taking their toll on more than

Dhauna's body, it seemed.
Feena leaned back toward Julith and asked, "How long has she been having them?"
Julith's gaze darted to her. "Feena!" she hissed and nodded at Dhauna and the sacred pool.
Feena rolled her eyes and said, "We're not novices, Julith. No one is standing over us to make sure we follow the ceremony. How long?" Feena nudged the other priestess. "Gome on."
"A little bit less than a month." Julith managed to speak almost without moving her lips. "Since the waning gibbous moon."
The night she had first sent for me, Feena thought. She winced.
"Do you know what happened?" Feena asked.
Julith gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head. "I found her barefoot in the courtyard in the middle of the night, almost at moonset. She's been barely eating since then. She's developed an obsession with the archives. And her moods..." The priestess fell silent for a moment, then added, "There are only a few of us in the temple who really notice the lapses of her mind, but it's clear that her health is failing." She glanced sideways at Feena. "If you're her friend, you should probably know that there's pressure on her to step down."
Feena's eyebrows rose. Dhauna Myritar had led Moonshadow Hall for well over twenty years—it was hard to think of the temple without her at its head.
"Pressure?" she asked. "Who from?"
Before Julith could answer, the High Moonmistress lowered her arms. On cue, a chorus of novices began to sing a hymn. After a few bars, the crowd joined in as well, a sweet roar of sound that would have been impossible to hear over. Julith and Feena dutifully added their voices to the song, but Julith caught Feena's eye and nodded toward the sacred pool again.

Four figures had stepped forward from the crowd. Two were acolytes bearing silver pitchers. Dhauna took the pitchers and poured their contents—milk and pale wine—into the sacred pool as a sacrifice to Selune.

Flanking the acolytes, however, were Mifano and Velsinore. Feena's eyes narrowed as another piece of the rivalry between the two fell into place.

The hymn ended. Feena leaned toward Julith once more as they knelt along with the rest of the crowd to receive the High Moonmistress's benediction.

"Dhauna hasn't named a successor yet, has she?" Feena guessed. Julith nodded. "But Velsinore and Mifano are the prime candidates?"

Julith nodded again. Feena grunted and straightened, her suspicion confirmed. Dhauna wanted her to help, but dodging the two rivals wouldn't be easy.

"In the face of darkness," called Dhauna from the front of the courtyard, "be strong, for the Bright Lady of Night gives you her blessing." She folded her hands. "May Selune guide your steps in the night and bring them to a new dawn."

The crowd rose in a rustle of fabric and a murmur of voices, the ceremony complete. Feena rose as well, turning to Julith. Dhauna's voice, however, brought the attention of the entire courtyard back to her.

"Friends!" she shouted. "Friends!"

When silence had fallen again, she spread her arms and smiled.

"I'd like you all to join me in a song of welcome. Moonshadow Hall opens its arms tonight as one of its own children returns home." She held out her hands. "Feena of Arch Wood, daughter of Maleva, come forward and be recognized."

"Oh, Moonmaiden's grace," Feena cursed under her breath. She shot a glance at Julith as the entire crowd turned toward her. "Is this one of Dhauna's bad days?"

Julith wrinkled her face and gave a tiny shrug.

"Wonderful," Feena muttered.
She stepped forward. The chorus of novices led the crowd in another hymn as she walked the length of the courtyard up to the High Moonmistress. Mifano gave her a playful wink as she passed. Feena glowered at him.
Dhauna reached out and took her hands. "Let all on whom Selune's light falls be welcome if they desire," she said with a soft smile. "Welcome back to Moonshadow Hall, Feena."
"Thank you, Mother Dhauna," Feena replied humbly. Dhauna turned her toward the watching crowd.
"Friends," she called, "this is Feena Archwood, a true priestess of Selune, and by Selune's grace—" The high priestess reached back and dipped her hand into the sacred pool, sending ripples through the shining reflection of the full moon, then pressed her dripping fingers to Feena's face —"I name her Moonmistress-Designate and my successor at Moonshadow Hall!"
Feena stared at Dhauna in shock.

## CHAPTER 2

There was probably no one in Yhaunn who could have said exactly how the district known as the Stiltways came into existence—merchants and traders, shops and taverns so solidly packed around a few twisted streets that they filled tall buildings from top to bottom and burst out of the sides like fat from an overstuffed sausage. There were various explanations bandied about, rising and falling in popularity from year to year. That, for example, the district had in the distant past been the site of the original encampment in Yhaunn's ancient quarry and that the first buildings of the Stiltways had grown up within the encampment's walls. Or that the Stiltways had been built around and within the shell of the first fortified tower in Yhaunn after the city's protectors had moved themselves to a bigger, better keep farther up the quarry. Or that the Stiltways' first cramped, crooked buildings had

been built along the walls of a dark gully—since buried—and that if one made ones way into the lost cellars beneath forgotten basements, one could still find that gully and the horrid spirits that lurked there, spirits sometimes said to be guarding a fabulous treasure.

That last theory, of course, found its greatest adherents among crackpot treasure hunters and children too frightened to stray from their mothers' sides.

The Stiltways were an image of Yhaunn in miniature: bustling and successful, but so hemmed in on either side that they could no longer grow out, only up. Their lowest level, where the streets twisted through damp darkness, was home to the most desperate of thieves, thugs, and fences. Prosperity and dignity rose with altitude. Three, four, and even five stories stood above the buried streets of ground level, all interconnected by a groaning, ever-changing maze of bridges, ladders, stairs, and ramps. A proper lady from the better part of the city could pass through the upper levels of the Stiltways by day, buy a new dress, and gossip with friends without ever even thinking of the hard-currency girls working in the perpetual shadows two floors below.

By night the shadows rose like foul cream. Proper ladies didn't come to the Stiltways after dark unless they wanted their friends to gossip about them.

On the highest level of the district, one enterprising landlord had managed to bring the bustle and the success, the shadows and the danger together. The tavern called the Sky's Mantle sprawled across the rooftops, a beacon to the more adventurous of the city's wealthy, a chance to brush against the darker dangers of the Stiltways in complete safety. And of course, on a warm summer night, to enjoy the rarest of luxuries in crowded Yhaunn: a wide terrace, open to moonlight and the cool sea breeze.

In one corner of the Mantle's terrace, the laughter of a cluster of young men and women trailed away into barely-restrained silence. Keph Thingoleir watched as one of their

number—a golden-haired half-elf lass in a sleeveless jerkin of black leather—rose from the table
and swaggered with predatory grace toward the bar. Her route took her past his table and the young man watched her carefully.
She swung her hips sharply as she passed.
Keph grabbed for the goblet and pitcher on the table-top, but the woman's hips were faster than his hands. He rescued the half-full pitcher, but the goblet, entirely full, rocked, wobbled, then fell over. Deep red wine splashed across the wood. Keph leaped to his feet and away from the flooding wine with a curse.
The half-elf smiled at him as her friends snickered.
"Spilled your drink, Keph?" she teased. "That was clumsy of you."
At the tables around the pair, patrons glanced at each other, then grabbed their drinks and scrambled away. Keph brushed light brown hair out of his face and set the pitcher down.
"Buy me another, Lyraene," he hissed through clenched teeth, "and I'll pretend this didn't happen."
"Pretend what didn't happen?" asked Lyraene. "This?" She reached down and grabbed the edge of the table, swiftly lifting it.
Before he could snatch it up again, the pitcher toppled over, adding to the cascade of wine that came rushing toward him. He danced back, but not quickly enough. Wine poured across his boots and trousers. He drew a sharp breath and his hand darted toward the hilt of the slim rapier he wore on his hip. He stopped it just in time.
Of all the nights for Lyraene to pick a fight, he cursed silently. Maybe it was just a coincidence, but if it was, misfortune had wrapped her ivory arms around him. He forced his hand back to his side. Under the whiskers of his goatee, his lips pressed hard together.
Lyraene's smile turned into a sneer. She let go of the table. It

dropped back down with a solid thud.
"Damn, Keph, you are having a bad day, aren't you?" she said. "What's the matter? City guard pick you up while they were looking for your big friend, Jarull? Your papa have to come bail his youngest son out of jail—again?
Papa tell you this was absolutely the last time he'd do it?" She smacked her forehead. "Oh, wait. That's exactly what happened."
No coincidence. Damn it. Keph glanced past Lyraene to her table of cronies. They were all watching eagerly. He groaned. They all knew, of course. And if they all knew....
Obey Strasus Thingoleir's ultimatum or rescue his own dignity? There wasn't really any choice.
Cursing his father and Lyraene equally, Keph twisted his glower into a sneer to match the half-elf s. "Now where could you have heard about that?" he asked her lightly. "Oh, wait." He smacked his forehead. "Your brother's on the city guard. Oh, wait." He smacked his head again. "Your fea(f-brother. Shame your mother was already married when she met your pointy-eared father."
Lyraene's breath hissed out between her teeth. Keph caught an ugly murmur from her friends. Lyraene, however, ignored them.
"At least I got something from my father," she said.
Without taking her eyes from Keph's, she reached across her body and drew her sword. All around them, patrons flinched back. Keph didn't move. Lyraene's posture was all wrong for an attack—the half-elf had something else in mind.
She held the rapier horizontally in front of her body and uttered a word of magic, then stroked her left hand along the blade. Where her fingers passed, light clung to the metal.
"Son of two wizards," she hissed. "Brother of two more. But you can't do that, can you, Keph? You've got no magic."
Hot blood rushed to Keph's face and roared in his ears. "Maybe I don't, Lyraene," he said, stepping around the table.

"But being able to cast a cantrip that my eight-year-old niece has mastered isn't especially impressive either. Now this-"
His rapier slid from his scabbard with a pure, ringing whisper. He held it up before himself, vertically, turning it so it caught the meager light on the terrace. Lyraene took a step back. Keph followed her, staying close.
"—this is impressive. Beautiful workmanship, isn't she?" He glanced up the length of the thin blade. "I call her Quick. She came from the forge of a master weapon-smith, Mandel Oakhand in Iriaebor. The sapphire in the hilt was found in Amn and was cut specifically for her." He looked Lyraene in the eye. She had her sword, still shining with feeble light, up. Her cronies were trying to get through to her, but the other patrons of the Mantle, struggling at the same time to stay back from the impending fight and get closer for a good view, were hampering them. Keph gave Lyraene a thin smile. "And in fact, my father did give me something." He lifted the rapier close to his face and whispered, "Storm's lash!"
With a crisp snap, blue lightning crackled once along the blade then subsided, though deep within the metal, sparks seemed to dance. Keph cocked an eyebrow at Lyraene.
"Do you still want to do this?" he asked. "More than ever," Lyraene replied—and slashed her blade at him.
Startled, Keph dropped Quick down. Lyraene's attack was hard and fast, slapping against the rapier in a flare of blue sparks. Her blow hammered Quick out of Keph's hand and sent her skittering away. Spectators stumbled back from the crackling weapon.
Keph stared down in shock at the point of Lyraene's sword as it hovered in front of his chest.
"Nice sword," she said. "I've heard about it before. It doesn't do you much good when it's lying over there, though, does it?" Her blade rose and fell, traveling between his throat and his groin. "You know, Keph, you've got a reputation, but without your magic sword and that big ox Jarull to back you

up, you're not that tough."
"Who says he doesn't have me to back him up?" rasped a deep voice.
Out of the corner of his eye, Keph saw a dark form bull through the crowd. As Lyraene half-turned to meet the charge, he ducked under and around her sword to come up at the half-elf s side and twist her arm back, pulling her sword down. Before she could even cry out, Jarull was out in the open and swinging heavy fists.
A jab snapped Lyraene's head back. Keph let her go and a heavy hook caught her, spinning her around and leaving her sprawled out on the terrace floor. Jarull reached back and snatched up Quick, tossing her to Keph.
"We need to go," he growled.
"I can't argue with that!" Keph shot back.
The Mantle's hulking peacekeepers were closing on them from one direction while Lyraene's friends were finally emerging from the crowd in the other.
"This way!" he called to Jarull and whirled in a third direction, toward the wall that surrounded the Mantle's terrace and hid the rooftops of the Stiltways from the view of the tavern's patrons.
Slamming Quick back into her scabbard, Keph jumped up on a table, then leaped to hook his arms over the top of the wall. A moment's scrambling and he heaved himself over to drop onto the rooftop beyond.
Jarull simply vaulted the wall with surprising lightness and grace for someone his size.
The commotion on the terrace wasn't going away, though. The peacekeepers might not care about them once they were off the premises, but Keph knew that Lyraene's friends —and Lyraene herself, once she recovered—would be after them. He grabbed Jamil's arm and dragged him on across the rooftops toward a dark gash of shadow, a rickety stair leading back down into the Stiltways. In only moments, they were out of sight and clambering down to the relative safety

of the Stiltways's lower levels.
As soon as they were on an even walkway again, Keph pulled Jarull into a rough embrace and pounded his arm against the big man's back.
"Tymora's own luck!" Keph swore. "Your timing has never been better! Damn it, where have you been for the past five days? Your mother had the city guard pick me
up today—she had them convinced I'd led you off and gotten you killed."
"Trembling old crow! She would think something like that." Jarull shoved Keph away from him, then threw a fist into his shoulder. "As if I'd let you get me killed!"
Even Jamil's playful punches had a tendency to hurt. Keph rubbed his shoulder as he looked his friend over. Jamil's grandmother on his father's side had been an ore and that blood granted him not only size and strength, but coarse, heavy features and a skin tone that carried a slightly grayish cast. That night, however, his skin seemed strangely pale and his dark eyes fever-bright.
"So where have you been, Jarull?" Keph asked. "Everyone's been wondering. For the last few days, you're all anyone's been talking about."
Jarull wrapped his arm around Keph and said, "Sailing a tempest of ale and wine, Keph, sailing a tempest!"
Drunk then. Jamil's human side gave him a turn of wit.
"If you've been drunk for five days," said Keph, "I'd have heard about it. You can't drink for a night without smashing something."
"I didn't say it was in Yhaunn, did I?" Jarull poked him in the ribs. "There are half a dozen festhalls in Ravens Bluff where I'm no longer welcome."
"You went to Ravens Bluff without me?" Keph glanced at his friend and narrowed his eyes. "Who is she?"
Jarull grinned and pinched his fingers together in front of his mouth. "I swore an oath not to say," he said. "But I can tell you this." His voice dropped. "She's dark, beautiful, meaner

than my grandmother, and she likes her men big and tough."
He flexed his free arm and something sparkled on his fist. Keph reached out and grabbed his hand, pulling it closer. Jarull wore a ring on his middle finger, a twisted band of age-blackened silver set with a deep purple amethyst. The big man tugged his hand free before he could get a better look. Keph glanced up and raised an eyebrow.
"From your woman of mystery?"
His friend roared with laughter. "And that's not all!" He jingled a pouch at his waist and swung Keph around to face the nearest ramp descending deeper into the Stiltways. "Come on! Down to the Cutter's Dip. I'm buying. You've got a head start on me tonight, but I'll try to catch up. If we're lucky, Lyraene will come looking for you again!" He held out his fist.
After a moment, Keph grinned, then laughed as well. "If we're lucky!" he said, and bashed Jarull's fist with his own.
<& --- ---
It was natural that he and Jarull should have become friends, Keph thought as he staggered home in the gray half-light of pre-dawn. They had met at some party or another, dragged there by their parents. How many years had it been? Not too many. Just as they were both entering the age when rebellion began to be a real possibility, that was for certain.
Jarull was the only son of a merchant who had seen her half-ore husband ride away to meet his death on some outrageous adventure and was determined not to let her son follow in his footsteps.
Keph was the youngest son of Strasus "the Bold" Thingoleir—a wizard who had once stood toe-to-toe with a red dragon, meeting fire with magic until the monster had been blasted into cinders—and Dagnalla Irongard, first Strasus's rival in the Art and later his wife.
Brother of Malia, her proud parents' first apprentice; brother of Roderio, their second; brother-in-law to Krin Foxrun, who

had won Malia's love in a mage duel fought over her honor; and uncle to Adrey Foxrun, already mastering cantrips at eight years of age; Keph was a tremendous disappointment to his magic-rich family.
Keph ground his teeth together in a fierce grin. Jarull's mother desperately wanted her son to stay by her side. Keph's parents would have been happy if their
Artless youngest son had just faded into the shadows.
Neither was likely to happen anytime soon.
He stumbled around a corner and across the small courtyard that lay before the Thingoleir family hall, Fourstaves House. Once it had been Twostaves House, named for the mages' staffs carried by Strasus and Dag-nalla, but when Malia and later Roderio had completed their apprenticeships, Strasus had given it a new name. Keph had heard that someone had suggested renaming it again, to Fivestaves House, once Krin had married Malia, but that his parents had refused, believing that it might offend the natural-born fifth member of their family. Keph snorted under his breath. Who had they been trying to fool?
Three black mastiffs with hides that gleamed like onyx rose from their haunches and growled as he approached the door.
"Bah!" he spat. "It's just me, you stupid chunks of rock!"
He strode up to the door guardians and stuck out his hand. Two of the dogs growled louder, but one leaned forward cautiously, touching his skin with its cold stone nose. After a heartbeat, all three dogs moved aside from the door and sat back in silence.
"Stupid...." Keph muttered and kicked at one in passing. He hurt his toe more than he hurt the stone beast.
The door opened easily at his touch and he walked through into the entry hall. The corridors of Fourstaves House were still silent at such an early hour. Keph limped, cursing with every step, across the hall and up the great, polished staircase that dominated it. At its top, he started to turn toward the south wing and the family's chambers, but

paused and turned instead to look down the dark hallway of the north wing. Along that hallway, doors opened onto the laboratories and workshops of the five wizards. His hand clenched on the banister.

The amethyst ring and a pouch full of coins weren't the only things Jarull had brought back from Ravens Bluff. As he and Keph had sat at their table in one of the
seediest of the Stiltways's seedy taverns, the big man had winked and said, "Don't think I forgot you, Keph."

His hand dipped into his belt pouch and he set a crystal vial on the table. Inside the vial, dark dust glittered like ground glass.

"What is it?" Keph had asked.

"It's called magesbane. Sprinkle a little where a wizard will cast a spell and he's in for a surprise." Jarull had given him a fierce grin, exposing sharp teeth. "Next time any wizard you know gets on your wrong side, you'll have something up your sleeve to turn back on them."

Keph stared, mesmerized, at the sparkling dust. "What does it do?"

"Nothing permanent," Jarull said, sliding the vial to Keph. "Give it a little try when you get home. I think you'll enjoy it."

Standing at the top of the stairs, Keph's hand slipped into his own belt pouch. His fingers curled around the crystal vial. Give it a little try when you get home. I think you'll enjoy it.

Roderio, Keph thought. When his father brought him home the day before after arranging for his release by the city guard, Roderio had passed by and simply shaken his head in disgust.

Keph turned and walked into the north wing of Fourstaves House. As he passed beneath the arch of the hallway, wards brushed against his skin like spider-webs. Through the years, Strasus had woven layer upon layer of protection over his home and especially over the dangers of its north wing. No

one who wasn't supposed to be there could enter the wing. Strasus and Dagnalla had encouraged their children's curiosity, however, and Keph, like his brother and sister, had always been able to enter freely. Even after his lack of magic had become blatantly apparent, wards throughout the house continued to permit him passage, as if his parents secretly hoped it was just some phase he could still grow out of.

At the door to Roderio's laboratory, he paused again.

The door to Strasus's study was at the end of the wing.

For a moment, Keph considered changing the target of his vengeance. Part of the reason Strasus had been so angry at having to bail him out of jail was that it had pulled him away from the research that had occupied his time of late. The stone cliffs that surrounded Yhaunn were laced with old tunnels and crevices, another legacy of the city's quarry origins. Not a month before, explorers had pulled some ancient treasure out of one of those tunnels and brought it to Strasus. Keph hadn't been allowed so much as a glimpse of it, of course, but whatever it was, it had become an obsession to Strasus, an obsession that had spread to Dagnalla and Malia as well—and that left Strasus resenting every moment spent apart from his research.

Sprinkling a little of the magesbane around his father's study could be very satisfying.

Keph wrinkled his nose. No, he thought, Roderio first. Let's see what this dust does.

He pushed against the door of the laboratory and felt more wards sift over him. When the eerie sensation passed, he stepped through and closed the door.

Cool flames sprang to life in bowls around the room. In an open-sided case of glass, a lizard striped in bright green and blue stirred at the sudden light. Roderio's familiar. Keph hurried across to the case as the lizard lifted its head drowsily from the magically warmed rock with which Roderio pampered it. Before it could do more than look around, Keph drew a cloth of dark velvet over the case, plunging it into

shadow once more. He heard a slow, reptilian sigh of contentment as the lizard sank back into sleep.

He let out a sigh of his own and looked around the laboratory at workbenches, vessels and braziers of various kinds, books, scrolls____His eyes fell on a rack of jars and pots, ingredients for the potions that Roderio was fond of creating. Books and vessels lay open on the workbench nearest the rack—Roderio was getting ready to brew some new concoction. Keph smiled to himself, went over to the rack and selected one of the jars at random. Setting it on the workbench, he popped off its lid and peered inside. The jar held some kind of dried, crumbled moss. "Perfect," he murmured.

He pulled the crystal vial out of his pocket and worked out the stopper, then carefully sprinkled a measure of the magesbane dust into the jar. It seemed to meld into the moss—he had to look closely to be sure it was even there. Roderio wouldn't see a thing. He closed the jar and replaced it on the shelf. He started to replace the stopper on the vial as well, but stopped.

What if Roderio didn't need the contents of that jar for his potion?

Cursing under his breath, Keph glanced over the books laid out on the workbench, but they were written in the flowing, elongated script used by elves. He couldn't read a word. He turned back to the rack and grimaced, then pulled down another half a dozen jars.

When he left the laboratory, less than half of the magesbane dust remained in the crystal vial but the chances that Roderio would be reaching for an ingredient treated with the dust were much higher. For good measure, Keph had even sprinkled a little of the dust into a couple of the vessels waiting on the workbench—to his delight, the dust vanished against glass just as easily as it had melded into the moss.

Let's see who's sneering tomorrow, Roderio, he thought as he staggered toward the south wing and his bedchamber.

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Keph woke to the sounds of hideous screams and horrified shrieks. It took a heartbeat before a name passed from the shrieks to his brain.
Roderio.
He thrashed free of the bed sheets, jammed himself into a pair of trousers, and wrenched open the door of his chamber to peer down the hallway. Servants were crowded around the arch of the north wing, kept back by the wards. The sharp odor of acid stung his nostrils. Keph's heart jumped from his chest into his throat.
Snatching up a shirt, he pulled it over his head and charged, still barefoot, down the hall.
"Move!" he shouted at the milling servants. "Move!"
Maids and underbutlers leaped out of his way. He careened through the wards and into the north wing.
Roderio lay stretched out on the floor of the hallway, surrounded by those few trusted servants able to bypass the wards on that wing. Dagnalla cradled his head and Malia was kneeling down at his side. Keph stared at his brother. His face was blistered and red. Fragments of broken glass were embedded in the skin of his face and neck as well. His eyes, clenched shut, were the worst. Blood oozed out from under the lids. His upper robes had been ripped away, exposing his chest and arms—they were burned too, though not so badly as his face. One servant clutched scalded hands, while another was thrusting the torn robes away with a stick. Saturated with a bilious yellow-green liquid, the ruined fabric smoldered and steamed.
"All gods have mercy..." Keph gasped.
Malia glanced up at the sound of his voice. "He's alive, Keph," she said quickly before turning away again. She had two vials clutched in one hand. "Tilt his head, mother," she ordered.
Dagnalla arched her son's head. Malia pushed a finger between his lips and forced Roderio's mouth open. Pulling

the stopper from one vial with her teeth, she poured a thick, pale blue liquid into his mouth, then pushed his mouth closed. Roderio swallowed convulsively and his body trembled, but some of the redness seemed to fade from his skin.
"Use the other potion," Dagnalla urged under her breath. Her face was pale. "That may be enough until a priest gets here to heal him properly."
Malia nodded and pulled the stopper from the second vial. The door to Roderio's laboratory stood open beyond them. Keph edged around his mother and sister toward it, his eyes fixed on the horrid sight of his brother's burned body.
"Keph!" said his father.
His voice broke the moment of terrible fascination. Keph looked up. Strasus Thingoleir stood in what was left of the laboratory. One gnarled hand held his staff in much the same way Keph would have held Quick in the face of possible danger. His other was spread wide in warning. His eyes were hard and stern. Keph swallowed.
"Father-"
"Just stay at the door. There's acid and broken glass everywhere." Keph blinked and Strasus pointed a finger at Keph's bare feet.
"Oh," mumbled Keph in surprise. "Right."
He surveyed the ruins of the laboratory from where he stood. Afternoon sunlight streamed through a window, lending an almost unnatural sharpness and clarity to the scene. The yellow-green liquid that had saturated Roderio's robes seemed to have splashed everywhere. Droplets smoked and steamed on the floor, on the walls, on workbenches—Roderio's lizard familiar crouched in its case, hissing violently at the acid that streaked the outside of the glass. A smear of the stuff marked where Roderio had been dragged across the floor and out of the room. The workbench that had been set up by the rack of jars and pots was flooded with it, the books of Elvish script so completely soaked that

they were already shriveling and turning black.
Among the devastation on the bench lay the remains . of not one of the jars Keph had treated with the magesbane, but four. Of the two vessels he had treated, there was no sign. He could only guess that they had given birth to the shards of glass that littered the laboratory floor and pierced his brother's flesh.
Beshaba's ivory arms, he cursed silently, what have you gotten me into, Jarull?
Strasus was turning around in the midst of the chaos, examining everything but especially the ruined workbench. Keph's mouth was dry. He scarcely dared to breathe. His father was sure to find something; nothing escaped his sharp-eyed gaze. And if he detected the magesbane—
But Strasus only grunted and stood up straight, stroking his gray beard as he turned away from the workbench. Keph's stomach twisted. He licked his lips, forcing moisture into his mouth again.
"What happened?" he asked, cautious.
The old wizard grimaced. "An accident," he said. "Roderio must have made some kind of mistake in his brewing."
He held out his staff and murmured a spell. With a sound like the edges of a hundred knives drawn across slate, the broken glass and crockery that had been scattered across the laboratory scraped itself together into neat piles. He wiped his free hand through the air and the smoking puddles and droplets of acid hissed and vanished. Strasus lowered his staff slowly to the ground and paced out of the room with a sigh.
Keph only barely managed to hold in a sigh of his own as his father stepped past him. An accident?
Out in the hall, Strasus knelt beside Roderio. "How is he?" he asked.
"Unconscious," said Dagnalla, "but I don't think he's getting any worse. A priest should arrive soon. We'll know better then."

Her voice was thick with tension. Strasus reached out and patted her on the shoulder, then helped her to her feet.
"It would be better if he were in his bed rather than lying on the floor," he said. "Malia—?"
"I'll see to it, father." She spread her hand speaking the words of a spell. Roderio's battered, unconscious body shuddered slightly, then rose up off the floor to about waist height. Malia gestured and Roderio glided down the hall toward the south wing. The watching servants parted before him. Strasus, Dagnalla, and Malia followed in his wake. Keph could hear his niece Adrey down the corridor, crying and asking what had happened to her uncle.
"Tymora's own luck," he breathed.
Keph wasn't quite sure how or why Strasus could come
to conclude that what had happened was nothing more than an accident, but Keph wasn't going to question his good fortune! As his family followed Roderio's floating form and the crowd of servants dispersed, Keph ducked into the laboratory. His brother's familiar hissed at him.
"Quiet, you!" he hissed back, and darted to the rack of jars, hastily grabbing those that remained of the ones he had dusted with the magesbane. Tucking them carefully into the crook of his arm, he darted back to the door and peered along the hall.
The servants were gone, his parents and sister all apparently in Roderio's bedchamber keeping watch over his brother. The hall was empty except for Adrey's disembodied wailing. Keph trotted down the hall to his own bedchamber and closed the door softly behind himself.
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"Kephi Hey, Keph!"
Keph halted his brisk pace and swung toward the sound of Jarull's voice so quickly he almost fell over. The big man was leaning back in the shadows of a stone wall, well out of the heat of the afternoon sun. He gestured for Keph to join him, but the friendly smile he offered faded after one look at the

glower on Keph's face.
"Dark, Keph, what's wrong with you?"
Keph stalked over to him. "That damn magesbane almost killed my brother!" he spat quietly. Like Jarull, many Yhauntans were seeking shelter from the heat, but there were still some people out and about. As much as he felt like shouting at his friend, he didn't dare. He shook the satchel that he carried over one shoulder. "I'm getting rid of what's left!"
"Killed him?" Jarull's eyes went wide. "Keph, what did you do with it?"
Biting off each word in anger, Keph told him. When he was finished, Jarull stared at him for a moment—then started laughing.
"It isn't funny!" Keph snarled.
He threw a punch at the big man. Jarull's hand snapped up and caught his fist. The laughter vanished from his voice.
"It is funny, Keph," he said softly.
"Oh, really?" Keph tugged his fist free of Jarull's grip. "What was the magesbane supposed to do?"
Jarull shrugged. "Explode." A strangled sound found its way out of Keph's throat, and Jarull added hastily, "A little bit, Keph. Only a little bit!"
"You said it wouldn't do anything permanent!"
"In a house with five powerful wizards, how much is there that's really permanent?" He spread his hands and raised his eyebrows. "Besides, how much do you have to hate someone to do what you did, just to make sure they got a little punishment?"
Keph blinked. "What?"
"How much of the magesbane did you say you used, Keph? Half a bottle? Without really knowing what would happen?" Jarull's voice dropped even lower and he leaned forward. "Tell me you regret it."
Keph stared at his friend. By daylight, Jarull looked even paler than he had the night before, his eyes even brighter.

Something was wrong with him, Keph realized. Something more had happened in Ravens Bluff than Jarull was saying.
"Jarull..." he said, starting to take a step back.
Jarull caught his arm. "Answer me, Keph. Do you regret what you did to Roderio? What was your first reaction when your father said he thought it was all just an accident?"
"I..." Keph opened his mouth—then shut it again. What had been his first reaction? Really?
Relief, he realized. Not regret for what he had done, nor dismay at what had happened to Roderio, but relief that he hadn't been caught. And more than that.
A sick feeling of elation had warmed him. He had knocked Roderio off his pedestal, not just physically, but in his father's eyes as well. The sigh that had escaped Strasus as he walked out of the laboratory—Roderio's
apparent accident had disappointed Strasus. Disappointed him deeply.
It felt wonderful.
Keph sank down beside Jarull, the magesbane-contaminated jars in his satchel clanking together roughly. He turned his head to stare at his friend.
"You were never in Ravens Bluff at all, were you?" he asked.
Jarull shook his head. Keph leaned back against the cool of the wall. "What's going on, Jarull?"
"I met a woman," murmured Jarull. He held up his hand and unfolded his fingers to reveal a symbol. Keph stared at it. A simple disk, painted black with a rim of deep purple.
The symbol of Shar, the Mistress of the Night, the Lady of Loss.
Fear shivered through Keph's guts. "Jarull...."
The big man clenched his fist around the disk, hiding it once more.
"I'm not taking it anymore, Keph," he said. "I've had it with my mother trying to control everything I do. I've had it with people looking down on me. I'm going to take what's mine."
He glanced down at Keph. "You're sick of having your family

and people like Lyraene walk all over you, aren't you, Keph? I know you are. We can do something about that."
He paused and cocked his head just a little bit. Keph looked away from his friend's too-bright eyes. Jarull was silent for a moment, then added, "I'll help you get rid of the last of that magesbane and I'll introduce you to some of my new friends. What do you think?"
He held out his fist, the one with the black and purple symbol wrapped inside. Keph stared at it. Shar....
But it had felt so good to bring down Roderio, at least a little bit.
He reached out and bashed his fist against Jarull's.

## CHAPTER 3

Coolie Shoondeep, the chubby high priest of Tymora in Yhaunn, droned on and on about the great shame that came when temple competed with temple. Would it be a great shame, Feena wondered, if she were to stuff an apple from the nearby fruit bowl into his gaping mouth to shut him up? Glancing around the table, she was fairly certain that the leaders of Yhaunn's other major temples would support her. Their eyes were beginning to glaze over as well. He's dull, thought Feena, he's methodical—Moonmaiden's grace, has there ever been a more unlikely priest , of the bold goddess of good fortune?
Maybe not, a part of her responded, but is he any more unlikely a high priest than you are a high priestess?
She grimaced deeply. Mifano, seated just behind and to the right of her, leaned forward.
"What's wrong now?" he murmured in her ear.
"He's driving me crazy," Feena murmured back. "I can't even tell what he's complaining about!"
"The Lady Monstaed's late husband had leased several prime properties in the city to Ladysluck Tower," Mifano explained patiently. "Lady Monstaed recently rejected the renewal of those leases and transferred them, and the rents they provide, to another temple." He cleared his throat. "By

the way, you have an appointment with Lady Monstaed tomorrow to thank her for her generosity."
Feena twisted around to stare at him in angry surprise. Her sudden, sharp movement drew the immediate attention of everyone else in the room. Colle broke off his tirade to scowl at her.
"Does the Moonmistress-Designate perhaps have an opinion on this matter?" he asked, eyebrow arched.
"I..." Feena fumbled for words—then shot a beseeching glance at Mifano. He sighed and leaned forward once more, whispering words that she repeated out loud. "I'm sorry to hear of your loss, High Luck. Our temples should stand as united in Yhaunn at large as they do within this council."
If Mifano had spoken the words himself, they would have emerged gracefully, an acknowledgement of Colle's complaint that was soothing without actually being an apology and thus a confession.
From Feena's mouth, they came out as wooden and stilted as a bad lie. Colle's face turned red with rage. Feena bit her tongue. Again. She had been doing it frequently for the past several days.
Dhauna Myritar had given no explanation for her actions at the Full Moon Blessing. She hadn't even spoken to Feena—or Mifano or Velsinore—instead closeting herself in her quarters and refusing to respond to any and all protests. She didn't even come out for meals, instead sending Julith down to the temple's refectory to fetch a tray. She might as well have left Moonshadow Hall entirely. Feena felt like she wanted to crawl under a rock and hide. Velsinore and Mifano, she was quite sure, would be happy
to hold one up for her. Preferably one that was very big and very heavy.
But she had agreed to help Dhauna, hadn't she? And no matter what opinions she, Mifano, or Velsinore might have had on the matter, the simple ceremony of succession had been performed. Dhauna had at long last named her

successor. A successor undeniably responsible for fulfilling the duties that the High Moonmistress could not—or would not—carry out.

Feena of Arch Wood village, Moonmistress-Designate of Moonshadow Hall. Bound by her word to Dhauna and her duty to Selune. At least Mifano and Velsinore had the pleasure of seeing her fail miserably at every turn.

The informal council of Yhaunn's religious leaders was only the latest disaster. In spite of Mifano's reluctant coaching, everything she did made her feel like nothing more than a backwoods yokel attending a high society dinner. She was fairly certain that most, if not all of the high priests and priestesses present had also immediately recognized that she was a werewolf. Colle had taken one look at her and flinched away, as if avoiding something unclean.

It didn't help that Velsinore had peevishly insisted on outfitting her in Selunite high regalia. Moonshadow Hall's seamstresses had hastily altered—drastically-some of Dhauna's old vestments to fit her. Feena had never worn so much fabric in her life. Layer upon layer of crinolines poofed out her skirts, a tight bodice made it difficult to breathe, and a high collar of starched lace scraped her neck every time she turned her head. Topping it all off, a coronet decorated with the mark of the approaching half moon dug painfully into her skull.

The wolf in her longed to run back to Arch Wood with her tail between her legs.

Just as it seemed Colle was about to heap another indignity on her already throbbing head, Mifano spoke up. "Your pardon, High Luck, but isn't one of the teachings of Tymora 'conduct yourself as your own masters, showing your good or bad fortune as confidence in the Lady'?"

Colle turned his scowl on Mifano, but quiet snickers were already rippling around the table. At its head, Endress Halatar, the elderly high priestess of the goddess of joy, laughed out loud and said, "He has you there, Colle. Grin

and bear your fortune—you've been beaten." She nodded to Mifano. "Well played!"
"But I..." Colle ground his teeth in frustration and spared one final glare for both Feena and Mifano, but sat down.
Mifano leaned back with a smug look on his face. Feena held back a glower of her own. The silver-haired priest had turned her awkwardness to his advantage.
"I believe that's all of our business," said Endress. "We meet again in one month at—" she rifled through some papers. A twitch crossed her smiling face—"Moonshadow Hall."
Uncomfortable silence fell across the table until Mifano broke it. "We look forward to welcoming you all."
He rose gracefully. Feena tried to stand as well, but the expansive volume of her skirts stuck between the arms of her chair and threatened to bring it up with her. Without looking down, Mifano offered her his arm while bracing one foot against the chair's leg until she had managed to pull herself free. Chin held high, Feena took his arm, and they paced out of the room. She tried to ignore the renewed round of snickers that followed her.
Velsinore was waiting when they arrived back at Moonshadow Hall. "Moonmistress-Designate," she said, "there's a matter we—"
"—must discuss," Feena finished for her. If there was anything she was growing to dislike more than tending to matters outside of Moonshadow Hall with Mifano, it was tending to matters within the Hall with Velsinore. "What is it this time?" she asked in resignation.
"The New Moon Beneficence." Velsinore turned as
she spoke and walked briskly through the gate into Moonshadow Hall, the Waning Crescent sword banging against her leg. Feena had to hasten to follow, lengthening her stride as best she could in the billowing skirts.
"What's the New Moon Beneficence?" she asked.
The nights of the new moon were generally a quiet and contemplative time for the followers of Selune, a recognition

of the only time that the moon didn't sail the sky. Feena couldn't recall any significant events of Selune's worship that took place during the dark of the moon.

"A charity feast instituted by Mother Dhauna several years ago," Velsinore replied. She turned along an inner corridor, heading for the long hall that was the temple's refectory. "She conceived of it as a way of extending Moonshadow Hall's good works in the city. All who wish to attend are welcome, whether they follow Our Silver Lady or not, and together we drive back the darkness with song."

As she spoke, a warm note entered Velsinore's voice. Feena looked sideways at her. She had known Velsinore almost as long as she had known Mifano, though not so well. When she and Mifano had been novices and later acolytes together, Velsinore—several years their elder-had already been a priestess, with little time and less patience for her juniors. Ironically, she had ended up in charge of the acolytes' dormitory. She had found a swift distrust for Mifano and his flirtatious manners, but it had always seemed to Feena that she reserved a special and immediate dislike for her. If punishments were handed out for bad behavior, they always seemed to fall more heavily when Feena was involved. Eventually they had developed a cool distance that had enabled them to get along, and before she left Moonshadow Hall to rejoin her mother in Arch Wood, Feena had even discovered a grudging respect for Velsinore. The priestess might have been cold and stiff on the outside, but her passion and devotion ran deep.

"That sounds like a wonderful way to pass the new moon," Feena said.

"It has been one of Mother Dhauna's wisest innovations," agreed Velsinore. "As the new moon is less than a tenday away, it's past time to begin planning the next Beneficence. The High Moonmistress has always been closely involved in the celebration. I presume you will want to keep up that tradition."

Feena's stomach sank. "You want me to speak at the feast?"
"It is expected." Velsinore pushed open the doors of the refectory. The temple's cook waited for them beside one of the dining hall's long tables. The table had been stacked with account books. Velsinore gestured toward them. "But for now, you need to plan the menu."
Feena stopped dead. "What?"
"You need to plan the feast," said Velsinore. "Idruth can give you suggestions, of course." She laid a hand on the stacked books. "These are accounts of our food stocks and of the sums budgeted for the event. You'll find menus of previous Beneficences as well, if you want to follow the easy path and duplicate one of them. Naturally, I can understand if you would prefer—"
"Velsinore," Feena interrupted, "is this really necessary?"
She fought to keep anger out of her voice, but didn't succeed. The cook flinched back. Velsinore stood firm. When she answered, her voice was cool. "The Moonmistress-Designate assumes the High Moonmistress's duties, does she not?"
Feena's hands were trembling. She forced them to be still.
"Fine," she growled. She glanced at Idruth and the cook flinched back another step. "A side of beef," she ordered, "and four- young pigs—more to round out the servings if that's not enough to feed the number of people who come—"
"Ah, meat," said Velsinore. She picked up a reed pen and made notes on a scrap of parchment. "Of course."
Feena sucked in her breath. "What do you mean by that?"
Velsinore looked up from the parchment. "Nothing at all, Moonmistress-Designate." Her voice was as calm as ever, but her eyes were hard. "Now," she asked, raising the pen, "would you like all this meat cooked or should we just leave it raw?"
Wo^f. Beast. Monster. Velsinore didn't say it, but she didn't need to. It was clear where her feelings lay.

Feena whirled around—skirts rustling, bodice clenching, coronet pinching—and stormed out of the refectory without another word. In the hallway outside, novices and clergy alike scrambled out of her path. Feena strode down the hall and up the ramp to the temple's second floor and Dhauna Myritar's quarters. She raised her fist and hammered on the door.

"Mother Dhauna!" she shouted. "Let me in." There was no response. Feena pounded on the wood again. "I'm not. going away this time, Dhauna. We're going to talk!"

There was still no sound from the other side of the door. Feena reached down and rattled the latch. It was locked. Feena took a step back, hiked up the froth of her skirts, and threw her shoulder against the door. Then again.

With the second blow, wood splintered. With a third, the lock tore free and the door slammed open. Feena released her skirts and stomped through.

There was no one in the High Moonmistress's quarters. Everything seemed to lie just as it had on the evening when Feena had first arrived, but neither Dhauna nor Julith were present. Feena clenched her jaw. Could they have slipped out of Moonshadow Hall while she was away at the council of temples? When Dhauna had spent so much time shut away, it hardly seemed likely that she should suddenly leave.

Feena's eye fell on the books and scrolls that were piled in the sitting room. "I have even more spread out in the archives," Dhauna had said that first evening. Feena turned and walked back out into the corridor.

On its east, south, and west sides, Moonshadow Hall was relatively low, the better to allow Selune's light to enter the central courtyard. On its north side, however,

it rose higher. The entire top floor of that height was occupied by the temple's archives, which were reached by a narrow, little-used ramp located along a dark corridor conveniently close to the quarters of the high priestess. Unlike the high priestess's quarters, though, the archives

were protected by a substantial door that was banded with iron and secured with a heavy lock. Normally the lock was open so that any member of the clergy, should they feel the desire, could consult the archives. It was locked.

Feena pounded on the thick wood and called, "Dhauna! Julith! I know you're in there. If you don't open this door, I swear by the Bright Lady of Night that I will get an axe and chop it open!"

A faint flutter of noise from within suggested that she hadn't been wrong and that her threat had been heard. A moment later, the door opened. Julith grabbed her arm and pulled her inside, shutting the door behind her.

"Does anyone else know we're here?" the dark-haired priestess whispered.

"If they have half a brain, they might figure it out," Feena grumbled as she marched on, leaving Julith scurrying in her wake.

Moonshadow Hall was one of the earliest major buildings built in Yhaunn. Its archives were correspondingly old and extensive. Because it was the largest temple of Selune in that part of Faerun, it had also become the repository for records gathered from even older shrines. Whenever a hermit-priestess died, whenever a remote chapel was finally allowed to collapse, whenever another temple simply needed to clear the dust from its vaults, old records and tattered tomes were sent to Moonshadow Hall to be preserved for the greater faith of Selune. Row upon row of high shelves crammed with books, papers, and scrolls filled the archives. Feena had never much liked the place. It was too quiet for her, too full of dead, dry words. As she walked into the dusty shadows, she almost had to fight against the muffling silence to keep her rage burning.

She found the High Moonmistress skimming a book that was a full handspan thick. Cool magical light shone from a humble paperweight, casting illumination across the book, an inkwell and pen, a tray with a half-eaten bowl of soup

from lunch, and a scattering of parchments crowded with scribbled notes. Dhauna glanced up sourly as Feena approached.
"I told you no one, Julith! I don't want to see anybody."
The old priestess had been lying when she said it was only the vestments that made her look wasted, Feena realized. Without them, Dhauna looked even more aged and frail. The sleeves of her simple, soft robe had been pinned back so they didn't tangle in the pages she turned.
Feena stepped forward without giving Julith a chance to reply and said, "Mother Dhauna, I need to talk to you."
"I don't have time, Feena." Dhauna began to turn a page, then stopped and squinted at it. "Did I just read this?" she muttered, and flipped ahead, then back again. She looked up at Feena with an angry glare. "Our Lady of Silver, do you see what you've made me do?" she spat. She slammed the book closed hard enough to make the glowing paperweight jump and the cold soup splash. "I didn't summon you to Moonshadow Hall just so you could start interrupting me, too!"
Feena stared at her, at the stacks of books surrounding her, and an ugly suspicion formed in her mind.
She narrowed her eyes and said, "You intended to name me as Moonmistress-Designate from the moment you sent for me!" She stalked up to the broad table at which Dhauna sat. "With me to handle your duties and keep Mifano and Velsinore busy, you were free to continue your research! That's it, isn't it? That's why you really needed me to come to Moonshadow Hall."
"Yes!" snapped Dhauna. "Yes, it is." She put her elbows on top of the book and propped up her head on her hands, rubbing her palms against her eyes and forehead. "I know it's not what you were thinking when you agreed to help me —"
"It isn't," Feena said. "You said you needed me."
Dhauna looked up at her. Her eyes were tired, like drawn

shadows at dusk. "I do need you, Feena," she said, raising one arm and gesturing around her. "All this... most of it I've accomplished in just the last few days and nights." There was a weary desperation in her voice. "Velsinore and Mifano are running you ragged, aren't they? I couldn't keep up with that and my duties to the temple and still try to work out what Selune is trying to tell me. I told you, I didn't—don't—dare trust anyone inside Moonshadow Hall. They might be the very source of the danger. Even turning to Julith was a risk, but I know that I can trust you. You were the only one I knew I could safely put in charge. If you'd only come sooner...." She rubbed her eyes again. "A tenday, Feena. Give me a tenday and I think I'll have all the answers."

Feena turned and glared out into the darkened recesses of the archives. Her fists were clenched so tightly she could feel her nails digging into her palms. The headache the half moon coronet had given her was pounding like a hammer in her head.

"Tell me what you know."

"Feena, I can't-"

"Tell me," Feena pressed, looking down at the old priestess. "If I'm going to put up with Mifano and Velsinore, I want to know that it's worth it. I want to know what we're dealing with. What have you found so far?" She forced her fists open. "What are these dreams?"

She heard Julith hiss softly in warning, but Dhauna held her hand up.

"No, Julith. It's all right." She sat back in her chair. Her eyes focused in the shadows and she said, "The dreams fade quickly, but with each one I remember a little more on waking. The situations vary from dream to dream, but some things are always the same—a profound unease that builds to horror. Sometimes I'm walking through a dark passage. Sometimes I'm just sitting in the courtyard of Moonshadow Hall at night, with nothing reflecting in the sacred pool but stars.

Sometimes I'm actually swimming in the pool—or maybe in the sea—alone. Wherever I am, the unease comes over me. Suddenly there are voices and something is dreadfully, terribly wrong. I know the voices, but what they're saying makes no sense. They're all around me, threatening to overcome me."

Dhauna's voice tightened. Her hands were wrapped around the arms of her chair.

"And there's something behind them," the old woman continued, "something very old, and no matter how terrifying the voices are, that thing is even worse. No matter how I try to escape it, I can't. Sooner or later, it's going to catch me and it's going to consume—"

She gasped, and her voice broke. Feena felt as if she couldn't move, spellbound by the tale, but Julith stepped around the table and moved to the old woman's side. Dhauna took Julith's hands.

"I have to finish," the high priestess said. She looked at Feena once more. "I always wake up before it catches me, but just before I do, I realize that I'm carrying something." She gestured around them. "A book. That's Selune's clue, Feena. I'll find the answers I need here."

Feena drew a slow breath and said, "There are a lot of books here, Mother Dhauna."

"Yes," the high priestess agreed, "but I think I understand other parts of the dream now, too. Selune's faith is ancient, among the oldest in Faerun. We've had our dark times. The consuming horror with many voices... the old terror that destroys tranquility?" She leaned forward and whispered one word. "Heresy."

Feena's teeth clenched. "Heresy? Mother Dhauna, is that really—"

"How old were you when the Time of Troubles fell upon Faerun, Feena?" Dhauna snapped. "Eleven? Twelve? It was before you came to Moonshadow Hall, I know that, but your mother must have told you about the fear and uncertainty

that came with the casting down of the gods. Heresy is worse. It's insidious. It isn't a test of faith, it's torture, chaos that divides temples and turns sister
against sister. Even in a faith so tolerant as Selune's, when heresy rises, all of us feel the upheaval."
"Mother Dhauna...." said Julith in soothing tones, but Dhauna brushed her away.
"What must be stirring now," she asked Feena, "that the Moonmaiden herself moves to warn us about it? Feena, believe me, whatever heresy grows in Moonshadow Hall, we have to stop it. We have to..."
She sighed and seemed to sink in on herself.
"Dhauna?" Feena gasped in alarm.
The High Moonmistress shook her head and replied, "I'm just... tired. Selune's warnings take their toll." She cast her eyes over the books in front of her, then turned a tired gaze on Feena. "I need to get back to work. A tenday, Feena. I'm sure of it. You'll stay?"
Feena nodded, numb.
"Good. Tell no one about the dreams, Feena. Even if you're defending me."
"I won't, Mother Dhauna," Feena promised, but the old woman was already turning back to her books.
A soft touch on her shoulder drew Feena's attention. Julith stood beside her. The dark-haired priestess shook her head and silently gestured for Feena to follow her.
"That's the best she's been in two days," she said as she led Feena back to the archive door. Julith glanced back over her shoulder at the pool of light that surrounded Dhauna. The High Moonmistress was gingerly unrolling a scroll that seemed ready to crumble at any sudden movement. "I'm worried, Feena. She's becoming obsessed with heresy. What if there is no heresy?"
"You mean, what if she's truly going mad?"
Julith held out her hands, helpless, and replied, "I don't know what to think. Sometimes I would say yes, but the books and

scrolls that she asks me to fetch, the notes that she makes—there's a method to them, I'd swear it."
"There are things to be seen by moonlight that sunlight cannot reveal," murmured Feena. It was a favorite saying among the followers of Selune. Sometimes the
Moonmaiden's insights could be more than a mortal mind was capable of dealing with.
But sometimes the saying was just an excuse.
Feena gripped Julith's hand and said, "Let me know if it gets worse."
"I will," Julith replied. She returned Feena's grip—and drew her into a close embrace. "And you come to me if you need to. I'll help you however I can."
Startled, Feena stiffened, but then relaxed. There was a genuine warmth in Julith's voice and embrace.
"I will," she said.
"If you need to be alone," Julith added, "I can tell you how to get rid of Velsinore and Mifano."
A smile spread across Feena's face and she stepped back.
"No, that's all right," she said. "I think they're done with me for today. But you're right. Some time alone is what I need."
When silence finally fell over Moonshadow Hall that night, Feena, wearing her own blouse and homespun skirt once more, slipped out of the chamber that Velsinore had reluctantly assigned her and down to the temple's kitchen. At the back of the big room there was a stout door. Feena murmured a prayer to Selune that nothing had changed substantially since her days as an acolyte at the temple, and drew back the door's heavy bolt.
The door swung open on a small kitchen herb garden built onto the side of Moonshadow Hall. Feena closed the door behind herself and stepped through the dew-damp beds to the wall that surrounded the garden. A squat, weathered pillar that might once have been a statue was right where she remembered it, if a little mossier and a little more deeply sunk in the ground. She stepped carefully on top of it and

reached up.

As an acolyte, she had just barely been able to reach the top of the wall with her fingertips. Now she could wrap her hands securely over it. With a quick hop and a little straining, she was up on top of it then slithering down into the shadows on the other side. An alley nearby formed a conveniently private niche. Feena slipped out of her clothes and tucked them into a bundle in a corner. Then she closed her eyes, took a breath, and opened herself to the wild power within her spirit.

The transformation came upon her like a warm breath across her skin, a shiver of sensation. Feena shook herself, the symbol of Selune jingling on the chain around her neck. When she opened her eyes again, she stood on four russet paws and the night air was rich with smells. Part of her wanted to sit back and offer a howl of joyful release to Selune's half-hidden face. She held that part back to a few delighted yips as she trotted off into Yhaunn's warm night.

I should have done this days ago, she thought. There was some truth to the tales that connected werewolves to the full moon. An innocent bitten by a werewolf and infected with its curse could be forced into a rampaging animal shape by the full moon's light. But Feena had been born a werewolf, inheriting the power from her dark father. She could change form whenever she desired. In her old days at the temple, both Dhauna's counsel and her mother's dire warnings had kept her safely inside the walls when she couldn't resist the call of her animal half. A hop over the wall in the herb garden had been only for acolytes desperate for a night in the city—a human night. The city was no place for a young wolf.

But she had become both a priestess and an adult. Yhaunn was no forest, but it was better than the stone cage that Moonshadow Hall sometimes felt like. As open and airy as the temple was, it was still a human building, enclosed and cut off from the world. The wolf inside her needed to be free,

away from Mifano's social niceties and Velsinore's restraining drudgeries.
Away—even for just a little while—from Dhauna's dark portents of danger.
Feena growled. No! No thoughts of the High Moonmistress. This is my time.
She threw back her head and set free the howl that she had restrained before.
Every dog for blocks around went mad in a frenzy of barking. In alleys nearby, cats screeched as they scrambled for safety.
Tongue lolling in satisfaction, Feena trotted on. She followed the natural slope of the city down toward Yhauntan Bay and the Sea of Fallen Stars, letting her nose lead her to places and things she might have overlooked as a human. In a tiny square, the stink of rotting vegetables haunted the site of a farmers' market during the day. Among the shadows of one alley, the tang of blood and birth—a mongrel bitch licked clean a new litter of puppies. She froze as she saw the wolf watching her. Feena kept her distance and after a time, the dog went back to licking her offspring, one eye fixed warily on the intruder. Feena spoke a silent prayer to Selune, asking her to watch over the newborn pups, before continuing on her way.
In another alley, she tore into a crawling swarm of rats, snatching them up in powerful jaws and breaking their spines with a swift shake. The vermin weren't exactly the blood-mad servants and marauding predators of Malar the Beastlord that she was used to stalking among the trees of the Arch Wood, but the skirmish left her panting and exhilarated. She rinsed the rats' foul taste from her mouth at a trough in a stable yard as the horses nearby whickered uneasily in their sleep.
Among the hovels closer to the docks, she listened outside a shack as the inhabitants wheezed and coughed. A miasma of pestilence drifted out of the shack. In the morning she

would have Mifano send some of the junior clergy to the neighborhood. Prayers and medicines might stop the disease before it became a plague.
Finally, she ended up on the docks, gazing out over the sea. All around her, ships and boats bobbed at anchor, a cacophony of creaking wood and straining rope. Their hulls oozed the odors of wet wood and tar, overlaid with the stench of sweat and excrement. Feena stood as far out on the docks as she could, nose raised high to catch the fresh wind as it came over the water. She had stood on the docks many times before in human form, but never before as a wolf. There were so many smells crowded onto the sea wind—water in vast quantity, of course, but beyond that...
Trees and flowers she couldn't have named.
Some powerful, bestial musk that sent a shiver down her back.
Fresh turned soil.
New cut wood.
Lightning—far out on the sea, a storm was brewing.
Some of the smells were probably her imagination, but they blended together in a perfume that set her heart racing and woke wanderlust within her.
Maybe someday, she thought, someday when Arch Wood doesn't need me anymore.
She drew a final deep breath and lowered her nose, turning to trot away from the water and back up to Moonshadow Hall.
She had barely cleared the stink of the docks when a new smell sent her cringing back instinctively, teeth bared and fur on end—a dark smell, acrid, metallic, and foul. The wolf in her hated it. The human recognized it.
Poison.
No one with any honest business could be about with poison at that hour. Nose to the ground, Feena circled the trail once, then jogged along in the direction that seemed freshest. She gleaned more information as she went. A man carried the

poison. He had been drinking, though not heavily, and his dinner had been some kind of spiced pork. The thick odor of clay clung to him—she would guess that he was a potter—but also the smell of cold, raw stone. It was a strange combination.

She caught sight of her quarry just as he stepped into the street-level shadows of the Stiltways.

A growl rumbled up from Feena's throat. She had been into the Stiltways as an acolyte, of course. It was all but impossible to live in Yhaunn without venturing into the district at least once. But even her human senses had reeled at the visual and auditory assault and it had taken her several visits to get used to the place. Crouched so low that she was almost crawling on her belly, her tail tucked tight between her legs, Feena creeped up to the intersection where the man had disappeared and peered inside.

Dank, vile odors wafted out at her. Sounds of pleasure and celebration mixed with groans of misery and suffering. The bright lights and chaos of the Stiltways were, at least, mostly on the levels over her head. Down below, figures moved and stumbled in shadow, their way lit only by smoky torches and shafts of light from above.

Her quarry was almost at the end of the street. The stink of the Stiltways masked the smell of the poison he carried. If she didn't follow, she would lose him.

Bright Lady of the Night guide me, thought Feena.

She rose and raced after him, the nails of her paws clicking on the stone of the street.

The man stopped and turned at the sound.

Feena plunged into the darkest of shadows. Another man curled up there, snoring and drunk. She hunkered down behind him as her quarry paused for a long moment, looking around—then moved on. Feena relaxed and rose.

The drunk man stirred.

"Fha... what?" he snorted. Bleary eyes focused on Feena's. "Nice dog," he slurred and reached out for her.

She slipped away from his hand and trotted after her quarry, taking more care as she ran. She stayed close to the shadows, and low. The man walked briskly, almost nervously. It seemed that he knew where he was going, but that he wasn't entirely eager to get there—or to be seen on his way.

He finally stopped again at the mouth of an alley. Feena curled into a doorway and watched as he looked furtively in all directions—up and down the street as well as up into the Stiltways above—then stepped quickly into
the shadows. He'd reached his destination. She darted up to the mouth of the alley and peered down it.

Beyond its narrow neck of a mouth, the alley opened up into a small courtyard that been practically buried by the platforms and walkways above it. Noise and some illumination drifted down from the levels overhead. Feena's quarry stood in the freckled shadows, a large dark flask in one hand as he fumbled with the heavy wooden cover on a low stone structure. A number of pipes pierced the wood, rising up and into the shadows, some passing into buildings, others ending in public hand pumps. A well.

Moonmaiden's grace, Feena cursed, if he pours the poison in there____

The wooden cover wasn't yielding to one hand. The man set the flask on the ground and hauled at the cover with both hands. It groaned and began to shift. Feena reached into her spirit, seeking the point of balance between woman and wolf —and shook herself.

Her chain and the battered symbol of Selune jingled softly.

The man started and the wooden cover slipped from his fingers.

"Who's there?" he called, peering back into the alley. Without taking his eyes away, he bent down, groping for the flask.

Feena flung herself down the alley, exploding out into the courtyard on legs as long and as powerful as a human's, but bent like those of a wolf. She still had a wolfs tail and a wolfs

head, as well, but her torso and arms were those" of a woman for all that they rippled with short reddish fur. Her hands, however, were huge, her fingers long, thick, and tipped with claws. Her muzzle all but incapable of forming human words, she let out a dangerous snarl as she leaped.

The man gasped and jerked back toward one of the courtyard's walls. Feena landed with a thump on the wooden cover of the well and spun around to face him.

He clutched the flask in his hand. She growled and stretched out clawed fingers. The man's eyes darted

around the tiny courtyard as he sought a way past her. From the top of the well, however, she commanded the space. He started to take a step and she jumped forward to block his way.

The dim light from above flashed on her medallion. The reflected light caught his eyes—and they widened.

"Selunite!" he gasped, pulling away. His features hardened into sneering resolve. "You won't have me, moon-bitch!"

Jerking the stopper free, he raised the flask to his lips and drank greedily.

Startled, Feena froze. When finally she barked and lunged forward to bat the flask away, it was too late. Only a few drops of the dark, acrid liquid splattered across the man's face. His eyes opened wide, the pupils huge, and he let out a strangled, gasping rattle before thrashing back against the wall. Dark froth oozed out of his mouth and across his lips. One hand clawed at his neck and a pendant there.

"Shar..." he slurred.

Horrified, Feena stepped away as he stumbled off his feet, fell to the ground, and lay still.

Moonmaiden's grace, she silently cursed.

Feena bent down swiftly and touched his neck, feeling for a pulse as best she could with her clumsy taloned fingers.

Nothing—he was already dead. But his dying words____

She seized his hand and pulled against muscles drawn as rigid as steel by the poison. The dead man's fingers

loosened enough to allow the pendant he had seized to fall free. A wooden disk, its rim dark but its center even darker. By better light, Feena knew it would be black surrounded by purple.

A follower of Shar.

Feena let his hand drop and scrambled for the flask as it spun slowly in the shadows. Spilled poison stained the neck and sides. She picked it up carefully, holding it in a beam of pale light from above. A scrap of paper with crude writing had been pasted to the flask's side.

"For the glory of the Lady of Loss," it read. "Let all know her power and despair."

Sharrans. There were Sharrans in Yhaunn.

The flask's stopper had rolled out of the dead man's other hand. Feena retrieved it and replaced it in the flask. A cold feeling was forming in the pit of her belly. If the enemies of Selune were operating in the city, there was certain to be trouble.

But at the same time, her thin, wolfs lips drew back and she bared her teeth in grim satisfaction. Archives for Dhauna, social graces for Mifano, accounts for Velsinore—a fight for Feena. Finally, something she could handle without feeling like a complete fool. Feena touched one clawed hand to the medallion around her throat as she stood and turned away from the poisoned corpse.

Bright Lady of the Night, she thought, thank you! -&-

The creature turned away. On one of the walkways overlooking the courtyard and its well, Variance Amatick waited another moment, then parted the shadows that had concealed her. A Selunite and a werewolf. So what she had been told was not an exaggeration.

"I hadn't expected to find you hunting the night, Moonmistress-Designate," she murmured to herself.

She took a step forward into shadow—and emerged on the ground in the courtyard. The dead man's eyes stared up at her. It was a nobler death than she would have given him. A

score of deaths and a flask proclaiming the glory of Shar would have been a good lure. The body of a fanatical Sharran cultist would have been even better.
But a Selunite to witness and stop the whole affair before Variance even had to dirty her hands, that was a gift from Shar herself.
That the well had not been poisoned was no great loss. A score of people had been spared death that night, but it would come for them eventually. The Selunite had
seen and heard all that was necessary. Moonshadow Hall would have to respond.
Still, there seemed little point in wasting a corpse when it could be used to create even more havoc and confusion.
Variance knelt down and broke the cord around the dead man's neck, tugging it and the symbol of Shar away. She tucked both into a fold of her own mantle. The Selunites knew their enemy, but no one else needed to.
"Have no fear," she told the corpse. "The Lady of Loss will know your soul. There's just one more sacrifice for you to make."
She rose and stepped back. Whispering a prayer to Shar, she crooked two fingers as if beckoning someone. Or something.
Shadows swirled and condensed into a massive black dog with a hide like night itself. Variance pointed at the cultist's body.

## CHAPTER 4

What?" Feena asked, looking from Velsinore to Mifano in stupefied disbelief.
"There are no Sharrans in Yhaunn, Feena," Mifano insisted. "We'd know if there were."
Sitting beside him, Velsinore nodded her agreement. Feena clenched her hands and her fingernails scraped across the polished top of the table around which the three of them sat. As soon as Moonshadow Hall had begun stirring that morning, she had commandeered one of its receiving rooms for the meeting. Her intention had been to keep

unnecessary panic from spreading through the junior members of the temple. It was beginning to look increasingly like the privacy would serve instead to keep word from spreading of another clash with Mifano and Velsinore.

"But I told you what I saw," Feena growled. She lifted one hand and pointed at the flask that

stood in the center of the table. Getting it back to Moonshadow Hall had not been easy. Shifting into wolf form and carrying the flask—poison lingering within it—in her mouth had been out of the question, of course. Shifting to human form would have left her naked. She had been forced to duck through alleys and shadows in her monstrous hybrid shape all the way back to the temple and her waiting clothes. "You can read the inscription on that yourself."

"A badly-written label is hardly an inscription," Mifano said as he picked up the flask again. "Anyone could have written this and stuck it to the flask. Anyone could have gone to a less than ethical alchemist and bought the poison. Anyone can invoke Shar's name if they choose to." He set the flask down. "It's not a cult, Feena. I think you stumbled across a misguided madman working on his own."

"But there could be a cult at work," protested Feena. "How do you know there isn't?"

Velsinore leaned forward. Her face was cross. "Because we do," she said. "Honestly, do you think we don't take the threat of Shar's followers seriously? We monitor every tale and rumor that passes through Yhaunn—and around it, too. We have faithful who aid us in watching. We're vigilant, Feena! You know the spoor of Malar's servants, don't you? You know when they come to Arch Wood. If there was any sign of a Sharran cult spreading in the city, we would have known."

"This is a sign!" Feena banged the table.

"No, it isn't!"

"Sisters!" snapped Mifano.

Feena caught her tongue. Across the table, Velsinore stiffened into silence. Mifano sighed and set the flask down.
"Feena," he said. "I don't want you to think that we're belittling what you did last night. It's like the shack you mentioned by the docks—by checking that disease now, we prevent a plague. You did the same thing. Shar's evil found a single servant, her toehold in the city. You broke
that toehold. And how many people would have died if that well had been poisoned? You saved them, too."
"But I... that wasn't..." Feena began. Words failed her. She pressed her hands over her face and groaned in frustration. "Oh!"
"I'm glad you think so highly of your service to Selune," said Velsinore as she rose from the table. "Someone else probably would have let such praise go to her head!" She swept out of the room.
At least the bitterness and resentment in the tall priestess' voice was plain.
Mifano's cheer simply rang hollow as he stood and asked, "What would you like done with the remaining poison, Feena? A victory toast for the heroine of the hour, Moonshadow Hall's shield against Shar? You didn't even have to lay a hand on that cultist—he killed himself just at the sight of you!"
Feena glared at him over the tops of her fingers and said, "Get rid of it, Mifano."
"As you wish," he replied, scooping up the vial. "I'll return the flask to you, though, shall I? It will make a wonderful souvenir."
"Get out," Feena snarled.
Mifano slid gracefully out the door, then leaned back
in.
"By the way," he said, "Lady Monstaed has sent her regrets—she won't be able to meet with you today. Maybe she heard about what happened at Ladysluck Tower yesterday. Well done."

He vanished again. Feena let him get a good long head start before standing and following.

What was I thinking last night? That Selune guided me to a problem I was capable of dealing with?

"Moonmaiden's grace," Feena cursed under breath. "Could I really have been that wrong?"

As much as she hated to admit it, Velsinore's argument made sense—the clergy of Moonshadow Hall probably would have already found a Sharran cult if one was operating in Yhaunn. They were attuned to the activities of

Selune's enemies. Mifano made sense too. Maybe she had stopped Shar's power before it could grow behind a single madman. Maybe that had been Selune's only intent, guiding her to prevent the deaths of innocent Yhauntans. Maybe she was a hero.

So why didn't she feel like one?

She needed advice. She needed to talk to Dhauna Myritar. Feena turned her path toward the cloisters and a short cut across the inner courtyard. First thing that morning, she had written a message, relating what had happened and what she intended to do, and dispatched a novice to deliver it while she met with Velsinore and Mifano. Feena blew out her breath in a long sigh. Having spoken with the pair of them, she felt like she needed the High Moonmistress more than ever!

Except Dhauna found her first. Feena was halfway across the courtyard when the high priestess stepped through the gate of the waning half moon and into the morning sunlight. She was swinging her canes stiffly, moving like a dwarf with vengeance in mind. Her face was grim. Feena hurried to her.

"Mother Dhauna—"

Dhauna lashed out with a cane as soon as Feena came within reach. The blow had little force behind it, but Feena still gasped and stumbled back. Dhauna tottered after her, cane flailing.

"You stupid girl!" she screeched. "What are you trying to do?

What are you trying to do?"
A wild swing threw the old woman off balance. Feena stepped in and caught her, holding her upright. From around the courtyard and within the cloisters, an assortment of clergy, acolytes, novices, and visitors to the temple were staring at them.
"Dhauna," she hissed. "What's wrong?"
"You!" spat the high priestess. "Running around the city in your wolf form! I read your message—what were you thinking? I promised your mother that so long as you were at Moonshadow Hall, I wouldn't let you out of the temple in anything but your human shape."
Feena's eyes went wide. "I'm... I'm sorry, Mother Dhauna," she said. "It won't happen again."
An apology was the only thing Feena could think of. She swallowed and wrapped her arm around Dhauna's thin shoulders.
"Here," said Feena, "sit with me and we'll talk about
it."
She nodded to the worn stone rim of the sacred pool. The High Moonmistress relaxed a little and followed as she drew her along. Feena glanced around and caught the eye of the nearest novice.
"Find Julith!" Feena hissed. "Quickly!"
The girl nodded and sprinted off. Other priestesses were gathering, concern on their faces. Feena warned them away with a shake of her head. She eased Dhauna down. "You made that promise a long time ago, Mother Dhauna," she murmured. "My mother brought me to Moonshadow Hall as a girl."
Dhauna stared at her a moment then grunted, "I know that." Her voice was soft. Feena hoped that she was finished shouting. "I'm talking about last night. You said you encountered a follower of Shar."
Feena clenched her jaw. Like a cloud passing over the sun, the High Moonmistress seemed lucid again.

"Maybe it would be better to discuss this somewhere—" Feena began.
Dhauna knocked her cane against the ground impatiently. "I came looking for you, didn't I? Tell me now."
Or not so lucid after all. Feena swallowed. Maybe it was better to humor her. None of the other priestesses were close enough to overhear their conversation.
"I did encounter a Sharran," Feena said cautiously. "I thought maybe there was a cult at work."
"Impossible," Dhauna said without hesitation. "We would have detected a Sharran cult before now."
Feena held back a grimace.
"Velsinore and Mifano said the same thing," she said. She hesitated for a moment, then met the old priestess's gaze, and asked as gently as she could manage, "But what
about your dreams? The darkness you described. Do you think it could be a warning about Sharran—?"
Dhauna stiffened, silencing Feena. "Selune's warning is clear," said the aged priestess. "It's not Shar we need to be concerned with."
Her voice threatened to climb once more.
"Mother Dhauna, please...." Feena said soothingly.
Dhauna grabbed her hand. "Sister, against sister" she said urgently. "Temples divided." Her eyes darted toward the priestesses gathered nearby. "One of them working against us. Or all of them." She glanced back to Feena. "But Shar? No, not Shar. Not this time."
She looked up again and smiled just as Julith pushed past the gawking priestesses and hurried over to them.
"You keep finding me here, Julith!" Dhauna called.
"You should tell me when you feel like going for a walk, Mother Dhauna," Julith said with brittle levity. She reached out and helped the High Moonmistress stand then glanced at Feena. "Feena...?"
"I'll tell you inside," Feena murmured as she stood.
"No," Julith said, "it's not that. I was looking for you, too.

High Luck Shoondeep from Ladysluck Tower is here with an officer of the city guard Jhezzail is holding them just inside the outer gate. They're asking to speak to the High Moonmistress."

Feena and Dhauna Myritar glanced at each other. Dhauna shook her head wearily. "Go, Feena," she said. "Whatever they want, you can deal with it."

Feena choked back a curse. How could a day that had started off with such promise have gone so wrong so quickly? She ran from the courtyard through the nearest gate, ignoring the stares of the gathered clergy. She couldn't imagine that the chubby high priest of Tymora was happy at being held back by a mere acolyte.

He wasn't, but Jhezzail was standing her ground with the air of a seasoned sentry as Colle Shoondeep seethed and ranted. Somehow, though, the High Luck managed to look even more enraged when Feena appeared and dismissed the girl. He stepped back coldly, drawing his robes around himself. The grizzled man wearing the crest of Yhaunn who accompanied him—the guard officer, Feena guessed—stared at her in confusion. He seemed ready to ask something, but Colle caught his eye and waved one chubby finger in a gesture of caution. The guard's eyes widened slightly. Feena glanced down at herself, aware for the first time that she was still wearing her peasant blouse and homespun skirt. Had the man mistaken her for a servant? She grimaced.

"What can I do for you, High Luck?" Feena asked with all the grace she could muster.

"We need to see Dhauna Myritar, Moonmistress-Designate," Colle said. "It is a serious matter that requires her attention." He indicated the guard. "This is Guard Captain Manas."

Feena raised an eyebrow and asked, "Captain?"

"As I said, this is a serious matter," Colle said, standing straight. "We need to see the High Moonmistress."

Feena crossed her arms and replied, "The High Moonmistress

isn't seeing anyone. Whatever your problem is, I can deal with it."
"Not this," said Manas. His voice was surprisingly pleasant, especially compared to the High Luck's. "This concerns the High Moonmistress alone."
"Dhauna Myritar has chosen me to act on her behalf," Feena growled. "What concerns her concerns me."
Colle's face flushed angrily. "More true than you—" he spat, then bit off his words abruptly.
Feena's eyes opened wide and she looked between the two men.
"What's going on?" she demanded.
Manas glanced at Colle as if seeking permission for something. The priest pressed his lips together and gave a little shake of his head, but the guard captain turned back to Feena.
"Moonmistress, you're a werewolf, aren't you?"
Feena actually jumped a little, startled by the blunt-ness of the question. Most people would have danced around the matter or tried to ignore it. In an instant she
understood both the guard captain's tension and his surprise at seeing her. He hadn't mistaken her for a servant, she realized—he had simply been shocked to find himself face to face with her. And Colle... it seemed the priest of Tymora had indeed recognized her as a werewolf at the council of temples the day before. He was already looking triumphant at her discomfort. Feena bit back another growl as one rose in her throat and drew herself up, matching Colle's stance.
"I have been blessed by Selune," she said, using Mifa-no's expression for her shapechanging. "What of it?"
"The guard has received a scattering of reports this morning of sightings of a creature seen lurking in the shadows around the city last night. A few of the reports described a wolf—unusual enough in the heart of the city—but others described the creature as walking onto two legs, a human

with the head and tail of a wolf." Manas tucked his thumbs into his sword belt. "In short, Moonmistress, the typical description of a werewolf."
Feena sucked in her breath. Apparently she hadn't been quite so stealthy as she thought. And if Colle had known the day before what she was...
The High Luck must have read her glare.
"Fortunately," he said, "word of the same sightings reached my ears as well. Naturally I went to the guard to offer my services and to tell them what I knew."
He tried to make his voice sound concerned, but didn't quite manage to disguise a gloating note. The priest had led the guard right to her.
"Naturally," Feena snapped.
"There's more, Moonmistress," Manas added. "A man's body was found just before dawn near Stonecutters Well "in the Stiltways, the area where most of the reports were made. He had been mauled by some kind of animal."
"Mauled?" Feena swung around to him. A body found by a well in the Stiltways? It sounded like it could be the Sharran—but she hadn't touched the man. "You think I...?"
Manas shook his head. "No, Moonmistress. Not necessarily. But the coincidence is remarkable—a man mauled, a werewolf sighted...." His hands shifted on his belt. "Your recent arrival in Yhaunn...."
What was going on? Feena thought. The Sharran had been dead practically before she reached him, and she would never mutilate a corpse—let alone one with poison coursing through it. Someone or something else must have mauled the corpse after she left. But why?
For a moment, she considered relating what she'd learned the night before. A Sharran cult was a danger to everyone. Except that there was no cult, was there? Velsinore, Mifano, and even Dhauna had made that clear. She looked at Manas and Colle. The faces of both men were hard, Colle's with unbecoming glee, Manas's with professional distance.

Something else occurred to Feena as well—she'd left Shar's disk clutched in the corpse's hand. If the disk had been found, surely they would have mentioned it.
Even if she could convince them that the man had been a Sharran cultist and a follower of the immortal enemy of Selune, could any dispute justify the ravaged body that had been found? If she confessed to what had happened, Feena realized, she'd be forced to defend what hadn't.
She must have been silent too long. Manas and Colle exchanged another glance. The guard captain pulled his thumbs from his belt.
"Moonmistress," he said, "can you answer some questions for us?"
Feena's tongue felt as if it were stuck to the roof of her mouth.
"Such as?" she asked. "Where were you last night?"
"She was with me," called Julith. The dark-haired priestess stepped out from the depths of the temple. She walked with grace and her voice was steady, but her face was flushed. She must have run all the way back down to the gate from Dhauna's quarters, Feena realized. Julith stopped just on the other side of the guard captain and
the High Luck, forcing them to divide their attention between her and Feena. "We were here, at Moonshadow Hall."
"All night?" Manas asked her.
Julith nodded and said, "We were holding vigil for the health of the High Moonmistress." She inclined her head toward Colle. "I'm sure the High Luck has told you Dhauna Myritar's health has failed her of late? It's most gratifying to see the concern that the high clergy of Yhaunn share for each other."
There wasn't a trace of irony in her voice—she could have been offering Colle genuine praise—yet the statement pushed the weight of the visit smoothly onto the high priest and left him red-faced and sputtering. Manas looked back to

Feena.
"Were you holding vigil here last night?" he asked
Feena swallowed. Did Julith have a plan? She hoped so.
"Yes," she lied.
Manas raised an eyebrow. Colle's sputtering ground down into indignation and he snapped, "An invocation to Tymora would enforce the truth, Manas!"
Feena's heart lurched, but Julith's response was swift and calm. "High Luck," she asked, "are you questioning the honesty of Selune's priestesses within her own temple? Would you ask the same of Dhauna Myritar if she were here?"
Colle's mouth opened, then closed as he struggled for words in the face of Julith's serene challenge. "I would never question the High. Moonmistress—" he managed finally, but Julith cut him off again.
"Then why do you question the Moonmistress-Designate? She is the High Moonmistress's voice and her chosen successor at Moonshadow Hall." Julith caught Feena's eye as she spoke. "Challenging her is the same as challenging Dhauna Myritar herself!"
Moonmaiden's grace, Feena cursed silently as she caught the priestess's meaning, do you know what you're asking, Julith? Selune give charm to my lying tongue!
The priestess of a country village might be intimidated by a guard captain of Yhaunn and a high priest of Tymora—but not the Moonmistress-Designate of Moonshadow Hall. She had authority. She needed to use it. Dredging up memories of Dhauna in her prime, Feena raised her chin and looked first Manas, then Colle, directly in the eye.
"You don't think I'm telling the truth?" she demanded. Tve spoken within the holy confines of Moonshadow Hall—and you doubt me?"
Selune must have heard her prayer, because Colle actually flinched at her vehemence, though Manas seemed to take it

in stride.
"No, Moonmistress," he said, "but it is necessary that we investigate such a suspicious death."
"Which you have done by calling both my honor and Selune's sacred gift into question." Feena faced down the guard captain. To her surprise, it didn't feel that much different from facing down another wolf. "I'll be blunt, Captain Manas. I can see that's a quality you appreciate." She leaned closer and said, "I serve Selune and my service is not gentle. I have killed in her name and in defense of the innocent. But this man you've found—I did not kill him." She glanced at Colle and growled, "Do you still feel the need to test the truth of that, High Luck?"
The high priest shook his head. Feena looked at Manas. The guard captain's face was blank with studied discipline—and perhaps a little respect.
"And you?" Feena asked.
"Moonmistress, you've answered all of my questions." He took a step back and gave her a sharp half-bow. "Thank you."
"You're welcome, guard captain."
"If we should discover that there is a werewolf at large in Yhaunn, may I call on your expertise?"
Feena restrained a blink of surprise. "Of course," she said. "Selune guide your search."
Manas turned to go, summoning Colle after him with a hard glance. The High Luck stared in angry shock at
Feena, then scurried after the guard captain. The two were exchanging angry words when they stepped out of the gate. Feena waited until they were out of sight entirely before letting out a sigh of relief.
"I think you made an enemy in Colle Shoondeep today, Feena," Julith said.
"He was.no friend to begin with," Feena replied. She slumped back against the nearest wall and pushed her fingers through her hair. "Thank you."

"Whispering in ceremony and now lying to city guards and high priests," Julith said through a thin smile. "Feena, you're a terrible influence."
Feena tried to echo the smile, but couldn't quite manage it.
Jarull was waiting in the cool shadow of the stone wall. Keph twitched Quick out of the way and settled down beside him.
"I got your note this morning," Keph said. "What is it?"
"Cyrume is dead."
Keph blinked at the big man.
Jarull growled and added, "The potter from the south side of the city?"
"Oh," Keph breathed.
The past several days had been a heady whirl for Keph. Jarull had introduced him to a number of new people—all followers of Shar. Faces and names had started to blur in Keph's mind. His memory hadn't been helped by nights spent drinking with Jarull and some of his new friends. He and Jarull weren't the only disaffected young people of Yhaunn. Cyrume the potter hadn't been among Jarull's immediate circle, but Keph thought he could picture him. He had seemed disturbingly intense.
"What happened to him?"
"He was found in the Stiltways last night," Jarull said.
Keph sat up sharply and asked, "That was him?"
Cold wrapped around his chest. The servants at Fourstaves House had been gossiping about the body found in the Stiltways. According to them, it had been torn to bloody shreds and half devoured. Panic was said to be spreading through the lower levels of the Stiltways.
"How... what...?"
"Sehinites," said Jarull. Keph blinked at him again.
"Followers of Selune?" In spite of his horror, he felt his mouth twitch almost into a smile. "That can't be right. I know Sehinites and Sharrans don't like each other, but have you seen the priestesses of Moonshadow Hall?"
Jarull glared at him and said, "You think they're all mercy

and innocence? I've heard they harbor werewolves, Keph. They think the moon goddess blesses lycanthropes." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of Moonshadow Hall. "That place is probably as much a kennel as a temple!"
"Dark," Keph muttered. He glanced at Jarull. "How did they know Cyrume was a Sharran?" he asked. "If it was Selunite werewolves that killed him, can they...?"
He touched his nose. Keph didn't think he had to ask the obvious question. If the Sehinites could tell—could smell maybe—that Cyrume was a Sharran, what was to stop them from coming for Jarull? Or maybe even for Keph himself eventually?
Jarull grunted and shook his head. "They can't sniff out Sharrans," he said. "You don't have to worry about that. Cyrume was on the goddess's business. The Selunites ripped him apart to stop him." He spat into the dust. "They didn't have to. They could probably have just taken him to the guard. But they killed him." He squinted, glaring at Keph through narrowed eyes. "Never trust a Selunite, Keph."
Keph nodded slowly.
"What now?" he asked. "Will you have some kind of memorial?"
Jarull shrugged and said, "I don't know. Maybe. I haven't been part of the cult that long." He twisted
around and rose to his feet. "Come with me. I sent you that note because there's someone who wants to meet you."
"Who?" Keph stood as well.
"Bolan."
Keph drew a sharp breath and dashed after Jarull. Of the big man's Sharran friends, there was one name Keph hadn't forgotten, even if he hadn't yet seen a face to place with it. Bolan was the closest thing to a high priest that the followers of Shar in Yhaunn had, the leader of their secretive cult.
And Bolan, Keph had quickly gathered, didn't meet with just

anybody.
Jarull set a brisk pace through the heat of the afternoon. Though they stuck to the relative cool of the shadows, Keph was sweating heavily before long. Jarull, however, barely seemed to notice the heat at all. Not a drop of sweat stood out on his pale skin. When Keph suggested a break in a nearby cellar tavern, a respite from the heat, the big man barely gave him a glance.
"When Bolan wants to see you," Jarull said over his shoulder, "you don't keep him waiting."
Their destination was halfway across the city, in one of Yhaunn's poorer neighborhoods. Jarull stopped and nodded at a narrow, unassuming house. The building was modest, in slightly better repair than those around it. Keph noticed, however, that the children playing on the street gave it a wide berth, and that a group of old men sitting on a plank bench nearby offered dark looks when they saw him and Jarull pause. Keph resisted the urge conceal his face.
"Do they know about Bolan here?" he whispered to Jarull.
"They don't know what we know." He went up to the door and opened it without knocking. Keph followed him through.
The air inside the house was blessedly cool—but it also stank. Keph's nose crinkled immediately. The smell was almost like his family's laboratories, but at the same time different. Wizards' laboratories tended to smell dry and faded, like old herbs, or else wet and rancid like rotting meat. Bolan's house had a different scent entirely: dark and heavy, a little bit metallic, a little bit like minerals. Keph could smell the sting of vinegar and the burning stench of sulfur, along with other odors he couldn't quite identify.
"Alchemy...." Keph muttered.
"Yes."
A man stepped out from a curtained doorway and Keph resisted the urge to stare. Short legs and a bullish neck made the man look as squat as a dwarf. His shoulders were round and thick, his chest and belly fat like a barrel. His

appearance might have been comical if not for the porcelain smoothness of his face. He had no wrinkles or stubble, and Keph was reasonably certain the sun hadn't touched his face in months. His head was bald on top, but a long fringe of unnaturally black and glossy hair was gathered in a tight braid that hung down his back. Jarull offered him an obeisance. After a heartbeat, Keph did the same.
Bolan grunted and said, "He's quick, isn't he?"
Jarull nodded silently. Keph waited as the squat alchemist looked him over then held out his hand.
"Let me see your rapier," he said.
Keph glanced at Jarull. His friend gave him a pointed glare and jerked his head toward Bolan. Keph drew Quick and handed her to Bolan. In contrast to the eerie perfection of his face, the alchemist's fingers were stained yellow and purple-black. He plucked Quick out of Keph's grasp and held her up, examining not the blade as a swordsman might, but rather the metal itself. After a moment, he grunted, then took the tip of the rapier between rough fingers and flexed the blade. Keph winced.
Bolan's dark eyes shot to him immediately.
"Too concerned with material things," he said. "Illusion. The Lady of Loss teaches otherwise."
He flexed Quick several more times, watching him closely. Keph struggled to keep his expression neutral. .
Bolan shrugged and said, "You'll learn."
He tossed the rapier back at Keph, who started to reach for it then snatched his hand back out of the way of the tumbling blade. Quick clattered to the floor. He scooped it up—and found Bolan nodding.
"Sensible enough to know when you could be hurt." His eyes glittered and he asked, "If your rapier had been falling into a pool of acid, would you have tried to catch it?"
He's testing me, Keph realized. For a heartbeat, rage at being manipulated flashed through him. He held it in check, forcing his face and his eyes to remain calm. Bolan's fine

eyebrows arched slightly.
"Well?" he asked. "Would you risk injury to save your sword from destruction?"
If he said yes, it would contradict Bolan's comment that material things weren't important. But no seemed too obvious an answer as well.
"That depends," Keph said finally, "on whether I needed it to defend myself."
Bolan's eyebrows rose higher. Keph waited for an answer. The alchemist, however, didn't give him one. He just turned and stepped back to the curtained doorway.
"Come through," he said, holding the curtain aside as Keph stepped past him.
The mineral smell was even stronger beyond the doorway, the hot stink of a burning furnace underlying it. On shadowy shelves around the room boxes, bins, and jars peered down. A variety of heavy glassware was meticulously arranged on a long, marble-topped workbench. A low rack held books. Keph couldn't help but think of Roderio's laboratory. He froze, the image of his brother's burned face—now bandaged and healing after the attentions of priests—washing over him.
"Ah," said Bolan from behind him. "How insensitive of me. This room must have unpleasant resonances for you."
Keph turned around. Bolan was watching him. So, from behind the alchemist, was Jarull. His friend must have told Bolan about Roderio's accident.
"No," Keph said firmly, hardening his heart. "Nothing unpleasant at all."
Bolan's flawless face didn't shift, but somehow he managed to convey the impression of a prankster disappointed at the failure of a trick. He gestured with his stained fingers, summoning Keph back.
"Do you know where Wedge Street is?" Bolan asked. When Keph nodded he continued, "There's an alley off its north side. Wait there at full dark after sunset tomorrow night."

The alchemist swept an arm toward the door to the street. "You can go now."
They were back in the bright heat of the afternoon before Keph even had time to blink. Squinting against the sudden glare, he twisted around just in time to see the door slam behind them. He looked up at Jarull. The big man was smiling grimly.
"Good job," he said. "It isn't easy to rattle Bolan."
Keph rubbed his eyes and said, "Jarull, was that what I think it was?"
Jarull nodded. "An invitation."
Down the street, the old men were staring at them again.
Jarull led Keph away from Bolan's house, strolling more casually, as if pleased that his friend had met with the alchemist's approval. Keph took a last look over his shoulder. "That was... faster than I expected."
"Bolan isn't a patient man," Jarull replied.
"That's not what I mean," Keph said. "I thought it would take some time before the offer was even extended. You just told me about the cult a few days ago!"
Jarull was silent for several paces, then said, "Maybe it has something to do with Cyrume's death. Maybe Bolan is recruiting for a war against the Sehinites."
Keph choked. "He would do that?"
Jarull shook his head and replied, "I don't think he would. But I've heard from some of the others that Bolan hasn't been himself lately. He's normally very cautious-he has to be or the Sehinites would have uncovered us months ago."
Jarull shook his head. "There's a woman," he said. "A visitor to the cult. She's only been around a little
more than a month. Some of the others don't like her, but I trust her more than Bolan." He clenched his fist. "Power flows off her like a shadow."
"Do you think she's pushing him to bring in new worshipers?"
"I think she's pushing him to do more than that. The mission

Cyrume was on last night—that was her idea."
."What's her name?" Keph asked.
"Variance. You may meet her tomorrow night."
"Maybe I will," agreed Keph. "Are you going to be there?"
"I'll wait with you in the alley," Jarull promised.
They walked for a few blocks in silence. Keph watched Jarull out of the corner of his eye. The big man stalked from shadow to shadow with as much strength as Keph had ever seen in him. Maybe even more—there was a new determination to him, a fire Keph could feel every time they talked. At the same time, Jarull was different. More distant. Harder. Shar had changed Jarull. Keph bit his lip.
"Jarull, this invitation...?"
Jarull paused and looked down at him. "Keph," he said, "if you're having second thoughts, now is not the time. An invitation like Bolan's is only extended once and if you choose not to accept it..." He gritted his teeth. "The cult has to be protected, Keph. It's too late to back out now."
Keph snorted and spun around to walk backward, facing him. "Jarull, when have I ever backed out of anything?"
Jarull smiled like a shark and said, "Never."
"That's right."
Keph turned back around and swaggered onward.

## CHAPTER 5

Wedge Street took its name from its shape: narrow and tapering, less a street than a long, dead-end courtyard. It lay on Yhaunn's south side, not too far inland from the festering slums of the docks. The buildings surrounding it were large and had once been grand. Over the years, they had been either divided up into dirty, cramped rooming houses or given over to decay. The buildings left to rot weren't necessarily uninhabited, however. As the last red of sunset faded over the Sea of Fallen Stars and muggy night descended, Keph could see firelight inside the old shells.
Keph kept his hand on Quick and tried to sink into the shadows of the alley, hoping no one would notice a man too

rich for the neighborhood. And alone.
Jarull hadn't come.
"Lying bastard," Keph muttered.
He squeezed Quick's grip, and stood his ground.
Jarull or no Jarull, he wasn't going to leave.
That afternoon, Roderio had ventured out of his chambers for the first time since his accident. Most of his bandages had been removed to reveal skin that was tender and baby pink, newly restored by the prayers of a priest. The only bandage still in place was the one that circled Roderio's head, covering his eyes. Soon that too could be removed, the priest had promised, but in the meantime, it was better to leave it. Looking barely worse off than a child playing a blindfold game, Roderio had shuffled about Fourstaves House, chatting and even laughing with his parents, his sister, his brother-in-law, his niece, the servants...
But not his brother. Keph had been ignored.
The night grew deeper. Tucked into the alley, all Keph could see overhead was the narrowest sliver of black sky. The few stars that twinkled in that space were pale and weak. Somewhere not too far away, people were singing some interminable halfling song. Keph stalked back and forth in the shadows.
"Come on, Bolan," he muttered. "Don't make me listen to that drivel alone all night."
"No one is alone in the darkness," murmured a voice.
Keph spun around, tearing Quick free of her scabbard.
"Storm's lashV he spat.
In the moment that lightning crackled around the blade, its blue glow shone on half a dozen figures, their heads shrouded in dark hoods.
But his attackers were ready for Quick. Strong arms seized him from behind and hands pried open his fingers. Keph yelled and struggled, but the rapier was torn away from him. The sparks that lingered on the blade popped and vanished. Stained by afterimages of that brief light, the darkness

seemed even deeper than before. Someone clamped a cloth over his mouth to muffle any further screams. Keph felt himself hustled forward. His heart thundered with panic.
The sounds of singing vanished and the sense of an open sky above him along with it. A door closed. He was inside.
Hands and arms released him. Keph panted in the darkness.
"Mistress of the Night," whispered a different voice, "we are mortal and imperfect. We beg your forgiveness for our failings."
There was a scratch and a burst of flame as someone struck a tindertwig and held it to the wick of a single candle.
Keph almost collapsed with relief at the sight of the black and purple disks around the necks of the figures in the dim light. It was the cult of Shar.
"Dark!" he gasped, "you gave—"
One of the figures slapped him.
"You have no voice in this place," a woman said gruffly. "You have no voice until the Lady of Loss gives you one."
Another figure held out a massive goblet carved from black stone and commanded, "Drink."
Keph stared into the goblet. It was filled with dark wine. He could smell it. He could smell something else as well, though, something bitter. He glanced up, trying to see the face of the cultist who held the goblet.
Too slow. Hands grabbed him again and pulled his head back. The rim of the goblet knocked painfully against his teeth, then wine flooded into his mouth. He choked against it.
"Drink it!" spat the cultist holding him.
Keph managed to gulp down some of the wine—and to keep gulping as the goblet was tilted higher and higher. Finally it was empty and he was released once more. He staggered and wiped futilely at his face and shirt. Both were soaked. Wine dripped out of his goatee. His lips felt strangely numb.
The cultist with the goblet raised it high and intoned, "He

has drunk the Elixir of the Void from the Cup of Night!"
"Hail to the Mistress of the Night!" chanted the other cultists in response.
Keph's stomach roiled and churned.
"The Dark Goddess is within him!"
"Hail to the Mistress of the Night!"
"Dark Dancer, we honor you!"
"Hail to the Mistress of the Night!"
Keph squinted through the dimness of the candlelight. The cultists' forms were beginning to spin in his vision. No, he realized, the cultists themselves were spinning. They were dancing, moving into a slowly swaying ring with him at its center. Keph's eyes flickered at the sight and he nearly staggered. He peered at the cultists. None of the them had either Jarull's height or Bolan's odd stature. He turned, trying to catch a glimpse of those behind him.
"He dances!" called a voice.
"Hail to the Mistress of the Night! Hail to the Dark Dancer!"
Arms swept Keph up and whirled him into the dance. Someone was making a simple rhythm, the slap of hands and feet punctuated by ringing, clashing steel. Keph hoped it wasn't Quick being used to make that noise.
The rhythm increased in tempo. The cultists began to spin and turn, pulling Keph with them. His guts lurched.
"Oh, dark!" he gasped helplessly. "Stop! Stop!"
No one ordered him to silence. Maybe no one heard him. Certainly no one listened to him. His head started to pound in time with the rhythm of the dance. He could feel cold sweat erupt on his skin, trickling over his eyelids and sliding down his back.
And they were no longer dancing in a circle. The shifting ring had become a procession that swayed through the darkness. The cultist carrying the candle led the way. Keph could just make her out at the head of the line. He was somewhere in the middle, the cultists around him holding him up. Candlelight shone on descending stairs. He

stumbled. The cultists caught him and thrust him forward. When the stairs ended, his legs kept trying to go down but the cultists caught him again, holding him up.

Keph turned and saw the instrument that kept the clash of the beat: a large metal ring being tapped, beaten, and stroked with a metal rod. There were two of them. No, three, all pounding into his spinning head. Keph clutched his ears and staggered against a wall. His stomach heaved once and a stream of vomit splashed across a floor of rough stone.

The cultists grabbed him and pulled him away before he could even stop gagging. He kept heaving as he stumbled. The cultists barely seemed to notice. They rushed him along, pulling at his arms and hands, at his shirt and sleeves. Fabric tore—his right arm was bare. Someone laughed hoarsely. Hands seized his arms and dragged him painfully onward. Keph staggered to his feet before the cold, raw stone of the floor could shred his trousers and the skin beneath.

"Stop!" he gasped again. "Please st—"

The candle went out. The clashing music stopped. A heartbeat later, the hands that held him vanished, and Keph was left to stand on his own in the darkness. The air was cold on his sweat-slicked skin. The panting of his breath came back to him in soft echoes.

"Where moonlight and sunlight have never fallen, we give praise to Shar."

Bolan's voice! Keph turned, trying to face its source, but echoes and a slow chant of response from the hidden cultists made it impossible.

"Mistress of the Night," Bolan prayed, "we fear your beauty. Forgive us the need to shield ourselves from it."

There was a clink of metal and the dim light of an uncovered brazier shone out. In the darkness, it was like a brilliant star. More braziers followed, uncovered by cultists, a magnificent constellation. Even so, they struggled against the darkness and as Keph's eyes adjusted to the light, he realized that the

braziers only made the shadows deeper by contrast. Wherever the cult had brought him, it was vast. He couldn't see any walls or a ceiling. Beyond the light of the braziers, there was simply nothing. He choked and fell to his knees, driven down by
the overwhelming power of the total, primal darkness.

Between two braziers and before an altar draped in black velvet stood Bolan. Something had changed in the strange, stunted man. His porcelain smooth face seemed to glow in the dim light, while robes of black trimmed with purple hid his bulky body. An aura of faith suffused him, lending him just a little of Shar's glory.

At his side, however, stood a woman of Calimshan who didn't borrow Shar's glory so much as radiate a dark power of her own. Black hair flowed loosely against dusky pale skin and black clothes embroidered in shimmering, deep purple thread.

"Her name is Variance," Jarull had said. "Power flows off her like a shadow. I trust her more than Bolan."

Variance was watching him. Keph tore his gaze away from her.

Bolan didn't seem to notice anything. The priest spread his arms wide and said, "A man comes before Shar. He has drunk the Elixir of the Void from the Cup of Night. Can we accept him?"

"Shar welcomes all into her embrace," murmured the cultists.

Keph stared at them. Maybe it was just the echoes, but there seemed to be far more people standing in the shadows than just those who had led him in.

"Let all be welcome," said Bolan, "if they grieve or mourn or hate. Let all be welcome if they desire vengeance or know bitterness."

"Shar welcomes all."

Bolan held out his hands to Keph. "Shar welcomes you into her embrace. Do you embrace Shar and welcome her?"

Keph nodded slowly—then emphatically.
"The Lady of Loss gives you voice," Bolan said kindly. "Speak."
"I embrace Shar," Keph croaked.
He could taste vomit and wine and whatever bitter substance had been mixed with the wine. The numbness on his lips had spread up his face and across his scalp.
"Stand and approach her altar."
Keph pushed himself to his feet and staggered toward Bolan, Variance, and the velvet-draped altar. The distance was misleading. What looked like it should have taken only a few steps to cross seemed to take many. Bolan and Variance swam in the shadows. Keph stumbled on until finally Bolan's hands grasped his. Even though Keph knew that he was taller than the alchemist-priest, Bolan appeared to tower over him. Keph squeezed his eyes shut, then looked again. Bolan was his proper height once more, though he looked up at him with eyes that were as deep as the night sky.
"Shar is a simple goddess," Bolan said. "The Mistress of the Night is direct. Other deities require followers to pledge themselves in long trials and tests. Service to Shar requires only one simple act."
Bolan released Keph's hands and turned around to seize the black velvet that covered the altar. He pulled it off with a flourish.
A young girl dressed in a pretty white nightgown lay on the altar, arms at her side and eyes closed in sleep. Keph stared in shock.
It was Adrey.
Bolan put a heavy-bladed knife into Keph's hand. "Kill her," he said.
The hilt of the knife was cold in Keph's hand. He couldn't move. He couldn't take his eyes off his niece, just as he hadn't been able to take his eyes off Roderio's injured body after the accident. It wasn't right. Could Bolan really want him to kill Adrey? The only member of his cursed family he

couldn't bring himself to hate?
"Kill her," Bolan said again. "Prove your devotion to Shar."
"Hail to the Mistress of the Night," chanted the cultists. Keph raised the knife slowly.
It couldn't be right. How could Adrey be here? When he'd set out for Wedge Street, she'd been safe within Fourstaves House. Anywhere else and he might have thought that the Sharrans had kidnapped her—but not
from Fourstaves House. The wards that Strasus had woven and re-woven around the house made that virtually impossible. Additional wards cast around Adrey's room by her parents and grandparents made it more secure than any other chamber save Strasus's own study. Keph gritted his teeth, trying to force back the muddling effects of the Elixir of the Void. There had to be another explanation for Adrey's presence. If Adrey was actually there.
He looked at her sleeping form again; so still, so perfect. Too perfect. He tried to recall what shape the black velvet had concealed on the altar before Bolan had whisked it away. Had there been any shape at all?
No. There hadn't. Keph clenched his teeth. That wasn't Adrey on the altar. It wasn't anyone or anything at all.
Dagnalla had soothed and entertained all of her children with magical illusions. Ironically, Artless Keph had been the one to see through the apparitions at the youngest age. The girl on Shar's altar was no more real than Dagnalla's flights of whimsy, he realized. It was just an illusion.
And yet she looked so much like Adrey. The knife trembled in Keph's hand. "Shar awaits," Bolan hissed.
Keph looked down. It's only an illusion, he thought. It's all part of Shar's test. You're not really doing anything wrong. Nobody even realizes you've figured it out! He glanced up into the darkness.
Do it, he told himself.
"Hail to the Mistress of the Night!" he shouted and plunged the knife down.

The only resistance it met was the altar itself. Steel hit stone and skittered across it with a horrid shriek. The girl wavered and vanished. The knife fell out of Keph's fingers and he staggered back—the shock he felt might as well have been real. Inside his chest, his heart was thundering like a smith's hammer.

Bolan stepped forward and Keph dropped down before him.

"Your intention proves your devotion," the priest said. "Your sacrifice to Shar is your own illusion of love." He rested his hands against Keph's head. "Mistress of the Night, a new follower enters your embrace," he prayed. "Bless him and cleanse him that he may continue in your work."

Cold darkness poured into Keph's body, searing away the haze of wine and scouring him clean of fear and doubt. He gasped at the touch of the goddess and when Bolan lifted his hands away, he rose. The alchemist-priest held something out to him: Shar's black and purple disk. Keph took the symbol, wrapping trembling fingers tight around it.

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Terrible screams ripped through Moonshadow Hall. In the central courtyard, Feena's head—and the heads of everyone else who stood listening as Velsinore sang the moonrise prayer—snapped up. Velsinore gasped in shock, her song shattered.

Against the big windows of Dhauna Myritar's sitting room, a silhouette reeled.

Feena reacted on instinct alone, charging across the courtyard and through the cloisters, back into the temple and up the ramp to the High Moonmistress's quarters. The screams were even louder inside, echoing through the halls. Every priestess and priest she passed seemed stunned to silence.

"Dhauna!" Feena shouted as she ran. "Julith!"

"Here!" Julith shouted back.

The door of Dhauna's chamber had been flung open. Julith's call came from inside. Feena caught herself at the door and

choked on her breath.
On the floor of the sitting room, Julith wrestled with Dhauna, trying to pin her down. The old woman was thrashing like a demon. Her face contorted and she screamed as if all the hordes of the Abyss were parading before her. Books and scrolls were scattered everywhere.
"Help me!" Julith yelled.
Feena leaped into the room, grabbing for Dhauna's flailing arms. One she caught, the other she missed. Dhauna's fingernails scratched a trail across her cheek.
"Moonmaiden's grace!" Feena spat. She caught hold of both of Dhauna's hands and held them firm. "Dhauna!" she shouted at the High Moonmistress. "Mother Dhauna ... calm down..."
Dhauna fixed her with burning eyes. "Too late!" she howled. 'Too late—"
Her voice soared up into a renewed shriek. Feena glanced at Julith, then at the door. Crowded into the doorframe, Velsinore and Mifano stared back at her.
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Cultists squeezed around Keph, slapping his shoulders and shaking his hand for all the world as if he had just won some contest at a Midsummer fair.
A few slipped back their cowls to reveal men and women he had already met through Jarull. Keph couldn't recall any of their names. They seemed completely wiped from his mind. The best response he could manage was a stunned smile and a slow nod. His heart was still racing. He clutched the disk of Shar, its edge hard against his palm.
Fuel was added to the smoldering braziers and they flared up with new light, pushing back the darkness just a bit more. With a start, Keph realized where they were— the temple of Shar lay in the tunnels that laced the rocky cliffs surrounding Yhaunn. At an intersection of tunnels, most likely. Firelight glimmered on a number of irregular arches of rock, though it didn't penetrate the shadows beyond. There

was still no sign of the ceiling overhead.
Nor was there any sign of Jarull.
Bolan had turned away from him. The other cultists were beginning to as well, breaking off into their own little groups like merchants at a party. One cultist, however, brought him a basin of water and a sponge. His eyes
flickered distastefully over the torn remains of Keph's vomit-soaked, wine-stained shirt. The first emotion to penetrate Keph's fogged mind was embarrassment. The symbol of Shar was strung on a black cord—he looped it around his neck, took the basin, and retreated to wash himself.
The water was blessedly cool against his face. When he wiped it away, however, he realized just how badly he stank.
"Dark," he muttered.
"In the grand temples of Shar," whispered a soft voice, "the initiation of a new devotee isn't so primitive."
Keph started and looked up. Variance stood beside him. He flushed and took a step away from her.
"F-forgive me..." he stuttered but the strange woman shook her head.
"No need. I've seen enough of Bolan's initiations now to be used to the effects."
She held out a fresh shirt—and Quick. Keph's eyes widened. He took both gratefully.
"Thank you," he said.
As he took Quick, he saw a flash of purple on Variance's hand. A ring of blackened silver set with an amethyst. Variance noticed him looking and nodded.
"You're thinking how like Jarull's this ring is," she said. She smiled slightly. "I gave his to him. He's told me about you, Keph."
Keph managed a small bow. "And me about you, Variance. Do you know where he is tonight? He promised me he'd be here."
"Bolan forbade him from attending. An initiate comes before Shar without support." She said it so bluntly that Keph

flushed again. Variance must have seen his shame. "It was Jarull's error," she said. "He shouldn't have offered to be here."
She turned away slightly, giving him some privacy while staying close. Keph set Quick and the clean shirt aside, stripped off his ruined garment, and began to sponge his body clean.
After a moment, Variance said, "You saw through Bolan's illusion."
Keph flinched so violently water splashed the stone around him. Variance glanced over her shoulder at him, then away again.
"Your secret's safe," she murmured, just barely loud enough for him to hear. "Bolan's a coward. Shar demands a sacrifice, but Bolan's too afraid to kidnap real people for fear of the local Sehinites uncovering his cell. He resorts to illusion too easily."
"With whatever was in the Elixir of the Void to help the illusion along?" Keph asked.
He brushed water from his arms and chest, then pulled the clean shirt on over still damp skin. Variance turned back around and looked at him with dark, emotionless eyes.
"The Elixir of the Void is a part of every Sharran's initiation. It's a poison. The Dark Goddess's blessing purges it. An initiate who can't prove his dedication to her deserves death."
"It's too late to back out now," Jarull had said. It was truer, even, than he'd probably thought!
Keph swallowed uncomfortably and asked, "Does Bolan know I saw through the illusion?"
Variance shook her head. "No. He was too busy waiting for the moment of sacrifice. I was the only one watching you." She moved a little closer. Her voice was intense. "Not many people could have seen through the illusion while fighting the effects of the elixir."
The aura of power that Variance commanded was palpable.

Keph could feel it radiating off of her.
"Everyone in my family is a wizard," he said. "When you grow up in a house like that, you learn a thing or two about illusions."
"Jarull told me about your family—and your feelings toward them," Variance commented. "But he also told me how you dealt with Bolan yesterday."
Keph winced. Jarull had been talking about him a lot. How often did the big man see Variance anyway?
Between his talking to her and her gift of the amethyst ring to him... Keph began to wonder if Jarull had more than just a special trust for Variance. The nervousness he felt around the woman receded a little bit.
"I just figured out what Bolan was up to," he told her. "He wasn't very subtle."
"You didn't just figure out what Bolan was up to," she said. "You made him uncomfortable. You have remarkable strength of will, Keph. Your penetration of the illusion confirms it." Variance gave him a long, measuring look as if peering deep inside him, then she nodded, almost as though to herself. "You may have potential," she murmured as she started to turn away.
"Potential?"
Without thinking, Keph grabbed for her. Variance's arm was shockingly cool. She stiffened and glared down at his hand. He snatched it away.
"I'm sorry," he apologized, "but... but you said 'potential'?"
No one had used the word describe him for years—not since his father had given up hope for him. Variance raised her eyebrows and nodded.
"What do you mean?" Keph blurted. "What kind of potential?"
She gave him another long look, then pulled him a little farther into the nearest shadows.
"Jarull told me that your family ignores you because you're not a wizard," she said.

Keph nodded slowly. "My parents tested me. I have all the talent of a potato when it comes to the Art."
Variance frowned at him. "Your parents have denied you a tremendous gift, Keph." She touched his forehead. Her finger was cold. "The Art—the magic of the arcane—comes from here." Her finger moved to his chest, lingering over his heart. "The power of divine magic comes from here. Wizards often fail to realize that." Her voice was slow and dark. "If your faith is as strong as your will, Keph, you could channel Shar's power as her priest."
Keph's heart was pounding once more. "A priest?" he asked.
"You have the potential," Variance said again. "It's not an easy path. You need—"
"Teach me," said Keph sharply. His hands were trembling like they never had before. Blood was singing in his ears. His heart felt ready to leap right out of his chest. "Variance, please. Teach me!" He clutched at the symbol of Shar around his neck. "If there's a test... something to prove that I could do it..."
Variance stepped back. "Faith doesn't work like that, Keph."
"I need to know!"
His words echoed from the rough rock walls of the temple. The other cultists turned to stare at them. Variance narrowed her eyes.
"Lower your voice," she hissed.
Keph clamped his mouth shut. She studied him.
"Perhaps I could try teaching you an orison," she said.
Keph nodded and asked, "That's like a cantrip, isn't it? The simplest kind of divine spell?"
"Don't use the words of arcanists to describe the power of faith."
She spread her hands and shadows seemed to reach out to engulf them, screening them from the other cultists. "Kneel," she ordered.
Keph knelt. The stone floor was hard under his knees. He ignored it and focused on Variance.

Her eyes were half closed and she was breathing deeply. Just as he had mimicked Jarull's obeisance to Bolan the day before, Keph mimicked her.
"Good," Variance said. "Now ... feel the darkness. Outside you. Within you. That is Shar." She spoke slowly, drawing out her words into a kind of lulling song. "Shar. The Nightsinger. The Dancer in the Dark. The Mistress of the Night, whose heart is the primal void that existed before all else and will exist again once Shar has drawn all creation into her embrace. Shar is more powerful than
any of us. She could extinguish us with a word. Only by recognizing that and in accepting her perfection can we hope to draw on even a fragment of her power." She exhaled slowly. "Do you feel Shar's presence, Keph?"
Keph fought back the excitement that Variance's words had stirred in him. He tried to recall the feeling that had driven him to his knees when he had first entered the temple—that sense of a living, primordial darkness, all-powerful, greater, and bigger than him or the puny lights that the cultists needed to...
"Yes," he said. "Yes, I think I can."
"Hold your faith," Variance told him. "Believe in Shar." She reached across her body and made a sign in front of her face. "Mistress of the Night, guide me."
Keph repeated her gesture and her words: "Mistress of the Night, guide me."
Nothing happened.
"Again."
Variance made the sign and spoke the words once more. Keph repeated them. Again, nothing happened.
"Believe in the Lady of Loss," Variance told him. "You speak a prayer, not a command. The words must be felt as well as spoken. Again."
Nothing.
"Again."
Nothing.

Variance remained silent, but Keph repeated the invocation without her prompting. He closed his eyes, concentrating on combining words, gesture, and faith.

Shar grant me this, he begged his newly-embraced deity silently. My heart is true. I've proven myself, haven't I?

Dimly, he heard Variance chanting under her breath. Different words, maybe a new prayer. He tried to put it out of his mind and pour everything he had into the orison. His knees started to ache, cold seeping up into them from the stone. He did his best to ignore the pain. He dredged up every memory of indignity suffered at the
hands of his parents, his sister and brother, laying them before the living darkness.

Take all this, he thought, take it and give me your power!

His words became mechanical, his memories a raw sore on his soul, but still the darkness was impassive. Everything he sent into it simply vanished, swallowed.

Until the darkness stirred.

Within him, outside of him—something shifted. Keph's eyes snapped open.

"Mistress of the Night, guide me!" he called.

A force swept through him, cold, deep, and terrible. It was like the blessing that Bolan had invoked over him, but different because it welled up from within his very soul and sucked his breath away. Keph choked and fell forward, skinning the palms of his hands. Deep, ragged gasps filled his lungs once more. Just breathing caused him pain, but he didn't care.

Clarity filled his mind, a perfect void from which he saw everything around him. Shar was with him. The Lady of Loss was ready to guide his hands, to inspire him with certainty like night itself.

The clarity only lasted a moment, but Keph knew it would linger on in his heart. He looked up at Variance.

"I did it," he gasped. "I called on Shar." He sucked in another breath and elation burst inside of him. "I cast a spell!"

Variance reached down a hand to help him up, but he just grabbed it and kissed her fingers. "Thank you!"
"Don't thank me," said Variance. "Thank the Dark Goddess."
The priestess was smiling, however. She twisted her hand, reversing the grip, and pulled Keph to his feet with surprising strength.
The shadows she had summoned dispersed. The cultists surrounded them. They were staring in awe—at him, Keph realized. Shar's newest devotee had suddenly surpassed them all.
Bolan was staring as well, though not in awe. His eyes were dark, cold pits in his flawless face. Keph flinched
back from his anger, but Variance met the priest's gaze boldly.
"Have respect, Bolan," she said. "You may be looking at your successor."
Bolan's face didn't move, but he managed to turn his response into a sneer. "A tiny magic, Keph. Do you think it will be enough to save you when a Selunite werewolf goes for your throat?"
There was more than disdain in his voice, though. Maybe it was some lingering touch of clarity, but Keph was certain that he heard a trace of fear as well.
He laughed.
A shadow flickered over Bolan's face and he whirled away. Variance's hand tightened on Keph's.
"Don't mock him," she said. "He's right. An orison is nothing."
"No," said Keph, "it's everything." He bowed deeply to her. "Ask me anything, Variance, and I would do it. That's the debt I owe you."
His heart and soul were alive, burning with a fierce, dark joy. Maybe it had been only an orison, but it meant that Strasus was wrong. He had magic.
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## CHAPTER 6

Your lies have given the boy confidence," Bolan observed.

Variance turned from watching the tunnel down which Keph and the other cultists had departed. Keph was laughing and joking with the cultists he knew, the ones Jarull had introduced him to. The energy within the young man was raw. He would do something dark that night and call it an honor to Shar. She felt a certain pride.

"Which bothers you more, Bolan?" she asked. "His confidence or my lies?

"His confidence," the alchemist said promptly. "It's unseemly. Shar teaches hopelessness and desperation. 'Never follow hope or turn to success, for such things are doomed. Do not strive to better yourself or plan for the future, for the future shall be bleak.'"

Variance looked down at the squat man and

said, "That self-defeating dogma is suitable for devotees, but not for priests. If we didn't seek to better ourselves, of what service would we be to Shar? If we can't hope for success, why bother trying?"

Bolan's face betrayed nothing.

"Your lies, then," he said after a moment.

"If lies truly bother you, you have no business being a priest."

Variance walked back toward the altar Bolan had constructed. For a makeshift temple, his creation was actually respectable. The darkness of Shar was true in him.

"It's not the lies as such that bother me," Bolan said as he stomped after her. "His faith is hollow." "His faith is real, Bolan."

"He spoke no oath. You should at least have allowed me that!" He caught her arm, turned her around, looked her in the eye, and said, "And he cast no spell. That was your doing. I could sense it. He can no more work divine magic than he can arcane."

Variance shrugged. "I wasn't lying when I said his will was

strong. With time, maybe he could enter Shar's priesthood. But for now—" she gave the stunted man the faintest of smiles—"he is unmarked. Keph is with Shar, but not o/Shar. He can do things we can't, yet we have a hold over him."
Bolan bent and scooped up the velvet altar cloth.
"It seems to me," he replied as he folded the cloth, "that you're the one with a hold over him. Keph and Jarull both. Every time I meet with that orc-blood Jarull, all I can see in his eyes is you."
Variance raised an eyebrow. Bolan's mouth twitched, the most expression she had ever seen break through his flawless face. He looked away.
"It is your prerogative, Mother Night," he mumbled.
He laid the cloth on the altar and murmured a prayer to Shar —not magical, simply devotional. When he bowed to the altar, Variance bowed as well.
Bolan straightened and began covering the braziers
that had illuminated the ceremony. The smell of dying coals and hot metal filled the air. The darkness in the temple deepened.
"I still think we should have had someone who was truly bound to Shar," he said. "Someone to take Cyrume's place." His stained fingers clenched on the lid of a brazier. "I'd like some time alone in my laboratory with that Selunite monster who killed him."
"His remains were scarcely identifiable when I found him," lied Variance. She folded her hands and added sadly, "Shar will bless him—he died in her service. A shame he wasn't able to complete his mission before the Selunite caught him."
She kept her face as expressionless as Bolan's.
The alchemist nodded and said, "The cultists are saying it was an entire pack that took Cyrume down. His martyrdom grows in the telling."
"The better to inspire others," Variance said.
He returned her nod and turned it into an obeisance. "I

thank the day that the Temple of Old Night sent you to me, Variance. Together we'll bring Moonshadow Hall low."
Variance smiled and said, "Thank you, Brother Night."
Bolan lit a candle from the embers of the last brazier before he covered it, then turned toward one of the many patches of deep shadow that cloaked his temple. To human eyes, perhaps, the shadow was impenetrable. Variance, however, saw through it easily enough. Beyond lay the narrow passage that Bolan—and Variance as well-used to enter and leave the tunnels. The priest probably thought he had a few more secret exits hidden from her. Variance was willing to allow him that delusion.
She followed him through the shadow and into the passage beyond, walking with surefooted ease where Bolan stumbled by flickering candlelight. If he'd guessed over the tendays since she had arrived in Yhaunn and presented herself to him that her confidence in the darkness was anything more than the blessing of Shar, he said nothing.
As they reached the end of the passage, however, he said, "I think Shar has held her hand over us, Variance. We've been lucky."
"How so?"
"The Selunites must have figured out what Cyrume intended, but they haven't taken any action against us. They didn't even tell the city guard."
Variance froze dead in the passage. Bolan continued on several paces before turning to look back at her.
"Mother Night?" he asked.
Variance forced herself to remain calm.
"You know something you haven't told me," she said.
In spite of her best efforts, her anger must have been clear. Bolan shook his head sharply.
"I only just found out myself, Mother Night!" His voice cracked with poorly concealed fear. "I have a client, a devotee of Selune, who comes to my shop to buy tinctures and medicines for Moonshadow Hall. She gossips, though

I'm certain she has no idea who she gossips to. She says the guard interviewed the Selunite werewolf, but the werewolf claimed an alibi. The beast must have taken Cyrume's holy symbol too, because the guard has no idea that he was a Sharran or what he intended to do. Only the Selunites know. And we've been watching for signs of reprisal, but there are none. From what my client says, the Selunites are more concerned with some internal matter than with us." He spread his hands and repeated, "We're lucky. Our own plans can proceed uninterrupted."

Variance bit back a curse.

Bolan must have interpreted her silence as anger, because he quickly added, "I can see if there's anything more we can learn—"

"No need," she said. "You're not the only one with a source among the Selunites. I'm meeting mine tonight and he's considerably better placed than a servant devotee. I'll find out what's going on inside Moonshadow Hall."

"While it still stands," said Bolan. He sounded relieved— and particularly zealous after having avoided her wrath.

"Of course," replied Variance.

She flicked her fingers and Bolan continued up the passage.

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Feena stepped into the receiving room and closed the door.

"She's sleeping," she said.

"Good." Mifano sat at the room's table, in the same seat he had occupied the day before. The silver-haired priest was dressed to go out—Feena could smell the scent he wore from across the room.

Velsinore, in contrast, still wore the ceremonial robe she had donned for moonrise. She stood on the far side of the table, arms clasped behind her back.

"What happened, Feena?" she asked.

"I don't know," Feena said. She stepped up to the table and settled her hands on the back of a chair. "Julith says she left Mother Dhauna reading at her desk and went to her own

room. She responded to Dhauna's screams just the same as the rest of us. She doesn't know what happened. I don't know what happened."
But she could guess. Dhauna had nodded off over her books—and another dream had come upon her.
Moonmaiden, she prayed silently, what danger could be so dire that you would risk killing a faithful priestess with warnings?
Out loud, she said, "I think she'll be all right in the morning."
Mifano frowned and glanced at Velsinore. Her lips twitched as if in some shared communication. Mifano looked back at Feena.
"We're not that optimistic," he said.
Feena's eyes narrowed. "What?"
"Mother Dhauna is going mad, Feena. We all know that. After tonight, I don't think we can deny it any longer."
"She's not mad," Feena replied.
"Then what do you call it?" Velsinore asked. "Tonight, a seizure. Yesterday she hit you in the courtyard." "She didn't mean it."
"But she did hit you. Half the temple saw it," said Velsinore, her face drawing tight. "She's been acting erratically for the last month. Julith has been trying to hide it, but she can't hide everything. Dhauna spends all her time now in her chambers or in the archives. When we do see her, she stares at us like we're up to something. She's paranoid, Feena."
"Maybe she has something to be paranoid about," Feena snapped. "Julith told me you—both of you—were pushing her to step aside."
"She should have stepped aside," growled Mifano. "To me or to Velsinore. Instead...."
He left his words hanging. Feena sucked in her breath.
"Instead she appointed a rough, back-country werewolf as her successor," she finished for him.
"If that isn't a sign of her madness, I don't know what is," Velsinore spat.

Feena ground her teeth.
"Dhauna isn't mad," she repeated.
"Explain her actions then!"
She had promised Dhauna not to tell anyone about the dreams. Feena hung her head.
Velsinore pursed her lips and muttered, "I thought so."
Mifano cleared his throat and said, "Feena, you should know that we've sent to the House of the Moon in Waterdeep for advice. If the high priestess there agrees with us, we'll seek out two others—and Dhauna Myritar will be forced to step aside." He met her eyes. "When she is, her recent decisions will also be questioned."
"And I'll be forced aside as well," said Feena.
"You keep saying you don't want this," Velsinore said. "The night of the full moon, when you first arrived, you couldn't wait to leave again."
There was a hint of cunning in Velsinore's voice. Feena glanced at her sharply, but it was Mifano who completed her suggestion.
"You want to get back to your village, don't you?" he said. "Your loyalty to Mother Dhauna does you credit, but you have to see that she's not herself anymore. You're suffering just like us." He leaned forward. "If you speak out, it will be easier to bring her down gracefully and for you to return home with dignity."
"You want me to betray her?" Feena snarled through clenched teeth.
Mifano waved his hands, palms down.
"No," he said. "We'd never ask that. But you need to take another look at the situation. Dhauna Myritar might truly believe that she's all right, but she can't go on like this. Neither can we. Neither can you." He sat back and added, "We've had nothing but chaos since you returned." —-
"You know as well as we do that you're not meant to be a High Moonmistress," added Velsinore.
Maybe Velsinore was trying to be soothing as well. Maybe

she had meant the words as an expression of sympathy for Feena's situation. They didn't come out that way. Feena whirled on her.
"Is that what you really think, Velsinore? Is it?" She glared at Mifano and asked, "What about you?"
Neither silver-haired priest nor tall priestess said anything.
"So," hissed Feena after a moment. She stepped back away from the table and spat on the floor. "All right then. Velsinore, you can run the temple and keep the numbers in your accounts. Mifano, you can make nice with the other priests of Yhaunn and carry on your petty seductions in pursuit of donations. I'll be standing by Dhauna when she needs me most."
She turned and flung open the door.
"Feena!" Mifano called.
Feena spun around and snapped her teeth at him.
He jerked away, color draining out of his face. Velsinore flinched and reached for her holy symbol.
Feena could feel the wolf pacing within her. When she looked down at her hands, they were huge and hairy, nails halfway to changing into claws. Her face... she could feel her nose and mouth pushing forward into a muzzle, her skin itching with a fine layer of fur. She bared long teeth at Mifano and Velsinore.
"Am I not blessed of Selune?* she growled awkwardly.
She pushed the wolf away, drawing back her anger, and stalked out of the room as a woman.
«S> ------<§>-
Julith was in Dhauna's sitting room, trying to restore the scattered books and scrolls to some kind of order. She looked up as Feena strode in. Like Velsinore and Mifano, she flinched back, but Feena could tell it was only from the violence of her expression.
"Feena," she asked, "what happened?"
"I had another talk with Mifano and Velsinore," Feena explained as she walked to the window and looked out over

the courtyard. High overhead, the moon was fading toward a crescent. Feena raised her chin. "I need your help, Julith. You know things about Moonshadow Hall, about Yhaunn. What you did yesterday, coaching me into intimidating Colle and Manas...."

She turned back to the room. Julith was staring at her, an unraveled scroll clutched in her arms and a puzzled look on her face.

"Could you do it again?" Feena asked. "Could you show me how to be a proper high priestess?"

The Stiltways seemed especially lively that night-blazing with light and color, roaring with noise, and fiery with excitement. Or maybe, Keph thought, it was all just him.

Real or imagined, the night felt good around him.

The elation of the ceremony, of drawing on Shar's power and channeling it into magic, still surged inside him. It felt like the night was a wave, carrying him along,

or a great dark heart, driving his pulse. It felt as if there was nothing he couldn't do. He was invulnerable!

Keph swung his arms around the shoulders of Talisk and Starne, two of the Sharrans Jarull had first introduced him to. A third, Baret, swaggered along behind them. A few days before, the cultists' names had slid right out of Keph's head —they were Jarull's friends, not his. Since the ceremony, though, it seemed as if he'd known the three forever and they were his friends, too. They were close in age to Jarull and him, and moved in similar circles. Keph wondered if he'd seen them before at parties or at the Sky's Mantle. Why had they never met before?

Maybe because Strasus had kept him too tightly under his thumb?

That wasn't going to happen again. Hail to the Mistress of the Night, he thought.

"Will it be the Mantle or Cutter's Dip, boys?" he shouted over the noise of the street.

"Mantle!" roared Starne.

"Cutter's Dip!" yelled Talisk.
Keph twisted to look back at Baret.
"Mantle!" said the third man.
"Mantle it is!" Keph replied.
He planted his feet and hauled Talisk around so they all turned a corner toward a staircase that led to the highest level of the Stiltways.
Just coming down the staircase were Lyraene and her friends.
She hadn't seen them.
An idea burst into Keph's head. He leaped back, dragging Talisk and Starne with him. Baret only barely managed to jump away from the tangle of cursing bodies.
"Dark!" he spat. "What are you doing, Keph?"
Keph pulled himself free. "There's going to be a half-elf woman coming around the corner in a moment," he hissed. "You three scatter, but follow my lead." He clenched his fist. "I want to give Shar proper homage on the night of my initiation."
The three man glanced at each other then ducked away. Keph ground his teeth together and stepped around the corner.
Lyraene was only steps away. Her hand darted to her sword at his sudden appearance—and stayed there when she recognized him.
"Keph!" she snarled.
"Did you miss me, Lyraene?" Keph asked. He kept his hand close to Quick, but not on her hilt. Lyraene's friends had their eyes on him, but the half-elf s gaze was darting around suspiciously. "Looking for Jarull?" he asked her. "Don't waste your time. He isn't here."
"That's what I thought last time," she grunted. She focused on him again. "We've got unfinished business."
"Just what I was thinking." He flicked the fingers of his left hand, gesturing her to him. "You and me. You know about Quick. I know about your tricks. What do you think—a duel?"

He could tell that she was considering it, trying to guess if he was hiding something.
"Bring your friends if you're worried," he suggested.
There were four of them—two men and two women. Talisk, Baret, and Starne would be able to handle them if they tried anything.
Lyraene's eyes narrowed, but she nodded and said, "Where?"
"Fanter's swaybridge," Keph said.
Her eyes narrowed even more, but then relaxed. "Now?"
Keph spread his arms wide and said, "There's no better time."
He spun around, boldly presenting his back to her, and started walking.
Fanter's was a tailor shop out near the edge of the Stiltways and up on the fourth level, a quiet and respectable area. Relatively few people went that way after dark. The swaybridge was a railed platform suspended from beams above and tied off to walkways at either end. No strangers would interrupt them and no allies could interfere
without being spotted on the empty bridge. If either of them tried to run, there would be no escape in two directions. It was a long way down to the street from the sides of the bridge. Fanter's had also spent good coin having spells of light cast on the posts of the bridge—they burned with a cold, eternal flame. Keph and Lyraene would have good lighting for their fight, but anyone watching would be blind to whatever happened in the deeper shadows around them.
As Keph stepped onto the swaybridge, Baret peered out quickly from a hiding spot near its far end. His hand flashed in the flickering, magical firelight—two fingers, pointing back the way Keph had come. Talisk and Starne would be hiding behind Lyraene and her friends. Keph gave no reaction, but just walked out to the middle of the bridge and turned. A moment later, Lyraene stepped onto the bridge as well.

A warm wind blowing through the canyon of the Stiltways stirred her blond hair. She drew her sword.
"Since you have a magic sword," she said, "I hope you don't mind if I even the odds a little."
She spoke a word and gestured with one hand. With her other, she stabbed the rapier up into the air. A pure, ringing note shimmered in the night as she cast the spell. The metal of the sword seemed to ripple faintly.
Keph smiled. "You're full of surprises, aren't you? Don't use up all your magic, though. You may need some later." He drew Quick and said, "Storm's lash!"
Lightning crackled up the blade and quickly subsided. Lyraene snorted as she walked out to meet him.
"I could just knock that out of your hand again," she said.
"You can try."
He held Quick up in a salute. Lyraene returned the gesture—then lunged.
Keph had been expecting it. He dodged back, then flicked Quick in a fast cut across her torso. Lyraene arched away from it, but only barely, and smacked her back against the railings of the bridge. The platform
shook with the impact, but swayed no more than a couple of inches. The ties at the ends held it firmly. Lyraene rolled off the railings, turning to meet him again. Her eyes narrowed.
"Nice try," she spat.
She swung her sword. He parried.
Their weapons met with a shriek. Blue sparks spat off of Quick's blade. The magic in the rapier guided his hand as he pushed Lyraene's sword to the side and tried to thrust inside her guard while she was out of line. The half-elf was faster though. Her sword came back up and caught Quick. Brushing the rapier aside, Lyraene thrust at him.
Keph gave ground and surged back. Lyraene thrust and retreated. With each blow and step, the swaybridge shimmied.
When Lyraene turned to avoid a blow, he slid past her and

threw an elbow into her stomach, then sprinted for the end of the bridge. Lyraene's cronies shouted in surprise and derision.
If they thought he was giving up the fight, they were going to be disappointed. At the end of the bridge, he reached down and slashed Quick at the thick ropes tying off the platform. Lightning crackled with the blow. The ropes parted. The end of the bridge swung free.
Keph whirled back to Lyraene. She was clutching the rail with her free hand but the shock on her face was -already fading into an angry growl.
"I hope your balance is as good as you think it is!" she yelled.
Lyraene let go of the rail and charged straight along the swaying bridge.
Keph met her with a charge of his own, catching her blow on Quick Sparks showered down on them. Keph leaned against Lyraene, trying to force her back, but she was stronger than she looked She heaved up, forcing their locked weapons away and bringing their bodies closer together. For a moment, Keph could feel her breath on his face.
Her weight shifted as she raised a foot to kick him or stomp on his leg.
Keph stopped straining against her and folded backward, twisting with her weight as he fell. Lyraene gasped and stumbled, falling past him to hit the wood of the platform. She squirmed around, trying to raise her sword above herself in defense, but as soon as she let him go Keph was sprinting again—to the other end of the bridge.
He swung Quick and lightning crackled again. The stink of burning rope puffed into the night wind. The whole bridge shook and swung.
"You crazy bastard!" yelled Lyraene.
Keph spun around. The half-elf was kneeling. She thrust her free hand at him and shouted a word of magic.
A shimmering bolt streaked from her hand. Out of instinct,

he raised Quick, but it was no good. Magic blasted through his body and left him gasping and staggering. His free hand found a rail and he grabbed it for support. Bright spots of pain danced in his vision. He could see Lyraene, though. She was up stalking toward him, sword out and ready.
Throwing his arm around the rail, he flung the weight of his body backward.
Ropes creaked and groaned as the platform swung forward. Lyraene stumbled with the motion—then staggered and fell as the end of the bridge slammed hard against the walkway that had once anchored it. Her sword flew out of her grasp and slid across the wood.
Keph stepped forward and stopped it with his foot. He scooped it up and advanced slowly on Lyraene. She lifted her head, blond hair falling down around her face, to stare at him.
"Get up," he ordered her.
The half-elf rose cautiously. With Quick hovering at the ready, Keph held her sword out to her.
"Take that," he said, "and cast the cantrip you used at the Mantle on it."
Her eyes narrowed. At the end of the bridge, her cronies began making nasty sounds.
"Don't try anything or she doesn't get a second chance!" Keph yelled at them. He twitched the sword. "Cast the cantrip!"
Lyraene reached out and took it. She kept her eyes on him as she spoke the spell and wiped her fingers along the blade, leaving pale light behind. Keph raised Quick to her. She lifted her glowing sword—and Keph swung Quick down hard and fast. Sparks flew and metal screeched.
The blow slapped Lyraene's sword out of her hand. Keph drew Quick back, then jabbed out with delicate precision. Lightning crackled and Lyraene staggered against the rail, gasping as she clutched at the neat, smoldering puncture in her left hip.

Lyraene's cronies were shouting again, but their shouts soon turned to cries of alarm. Out of the corner of his eye, Keph could see Talisk and Starne menacing them with slashes of their own swords. Bracing himself against the swaying of the bridge, Keph raised Quick once more.

"Remember that cantrip!" he screamed. "It's going to be the last spell you ever cast!"

He thrust Quick down into Lyraene's right arm—and held it there, the rapier piercing the flesh of her forearm and grating along the bone. Lyraene's shrieks almost drowned out the snap of lightning as it lashed through her. Her muscles twisted as they burned, warping her hand and wrist into a dreadful claw. Keph wrenched Quick free. Lyraene fell to the floor of the platform, twitching and screeching. Keph planted a foot on her shoulder to hold her still and took aim at her left arm.

"Halt!"

The command rolled over and through him like thunder, locking his arm and stopping his blow. Keph gasped and looked up.

A man in fine clothing was racing along the walkway toward the other end of the swaying bridge. In his hand he held a long, delicate sword that burned with cold white light. The magical illumination shimmered on his
silvery-white hair and on the silver medallion he wore around his neck. Baret leaped out to confront him, but the man barely paused in his pace. His free hand thrust out, fingers spread wide.

"In Selune's name, I bid you go from this place!"

To Keph's eyes, the man seemed to shimmer with power. He could only guess what Baret saw. The cultist shrieked louder than Lyraene, turned on his heels, and fled in terror.

A priest of Selune! Keph cursed.

The silver-haired man's command was already fading and he could move again. He stumbled away from Lyraene, twitching Quick to point at the priest as the man paused

before the end of the swaying bridge. Keph risked a fast glance over his shoulder. Lyraene's cronies had regained some of their bravado while Starne and Talisk were retreating, glancing uneasily between cronies and priest.

Keph whirled and fled toward them, vaulting from bridge to walkway with a hoarse shout. He crashed into two of Lyraene's friends, sending them sprawling, then scrambled to his feet. As the other two spun around in surprise, Starne and Talisk turned and fled. Keph sprinted after them, lashing Quick at the cronies to drive them back.

There were stairs down to the depths of the Stiltways nearby. They raced down them and down the next set, too. Only when they were two levels and a full street away from the vengeful priest did they stop.

"Dark," panted Talisk. "What happened? Where did he come from?"

"It doesn't matter," Keph replied. He held up Quick. Lyraene's blood was still smoking on the metal. He kissed the blade. "Hail Shar, Mistress of the Night," he murmured, his voice thick with rapture. "Thank you."

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The old woman seated alone at a table for two pressed her hands to her cheeks as Mifano crossed the terrace of the Sky's Mantle.

"My dear," she gasped, "I was angry that you were so late, but I see that you must have reason!" She reached out and touched his doublet. "Is that blood?"

"Not mine, madam."

He sat down wearily and reached across the table for the decanter of wine. It was almost half empty and he gave the old woman a disapproving look.

"You are very late, Mifano," she said.

He shook his head and poured wine into a goblet.

"I was late when I left Moonshadow Hall," he explained, "and a good thing, too—I took a shortcut and ended up interrupting a duel." He gulped wine and shook his head

again. "No," he corrected himself, "not a duel. Something closer to torture. I was able to offer the victim healing and she may recover the use of her arm."
"My poor, silver-haired dear!" The woman reached out and wrapped her fingers around his free hand. "You're a hero!"
"It was nothing more than my duty," he said, but smiled anyway and set the wineglass down. "And a terrible duty it is to keep me a moment longer than necessary from the company of the charming Lady Monstaed!" He raised her hands and kissed them, then smiled again. "And I must compliment you again on your fine new ring. So many other women of your station disdain amethyst as gaudy, but you wear it so well."
"Oh, you tremendous flirt," laughed Variance. She smiled with wrinkled lips. "But tell me, what kept you at Moonshadow Hall? What has been happening there since we spoke last?"

## CHAPTER 7

Feena leaned forward into the breeze that blew through the carriage window. Julith clicked her tongue in gentle disapproval, and Feena grimaced and sat back, swaying slightly with the carriage's motion.

"A high priestess isn't allowed fresh air?" Feena muttered under her breath.

"A high priestess can have fresh air," Julith replied, " but she should try not to mess up her hair."

Feena wrinkled her nose and asked, "How much longer?"

Julith peered out the window herself, but Feena noticed that she was careful to avoid the breeze.

"We're almost there," the dark-haired priestess said. "Now remember: watered wine only and drink it sparingly. Merchants and most nobles will bow to you, but you bow only to the Nessarch
of Yhaunn, if we encounter him. Treat clergy as equals, whatever their faith or station. Only sit down to converse with someone who's already seated. Stick to minor topics. That's safest. If you really need to start a conversation with a scholar or a mage, ask about their research but be careful—they can usually talk for hours. You don't need to discuss city politics or temple policy. This isn't that kind of-"

"I'm not going to remember all of this."

Julith squeezed her hand and said, "You'll do fine, Feena. Don't worry. If there's anything you need to know, I'll be right beside you."

"I'd rather you were right in front of me," Feena grumbled.

It was only half a jest. Her stomach was knotted. Julith had permitted her only a very light dinner that night, and Feena was grateful for that.

The carriage turned and its rattling progress slowed then stopped. Bright lights shone through the windows. Julith took a deep breath as footmen scurried outside.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"No," Feena grunted, "but it's too late now, isn't it?"

The carriage door opened. Feena rose into an uncomfortable crouch, then stepped out as Julith had taught her—head and shoulders first, arm extended to take the hand of a waiting footman, then feet, down to the step-stool placed for her convenience, unfolding gracefully as she cleared the door.

She managed it all without tripping on her shoes or her dress.

"Well done," murmured Julith from behind her as she stepped down from the carriage herself. "Let's keep going."

Feena nodded and moved forward. Small steps, she reminded herself. No need for long strides.

The white walls of the mansion of Ammanas Aum-leagarr, patron of Yhaunn's arts and host of the city's most lavish parties, loomed above them. Tall lanterns

of glass and bronze lit the great entrance arch; within it, smaller lanterns marked a path up a broad flight of stairs. The sounds of talk, laughter, and music floated down from above. Other guests to Ammanas's party were drifting up the stairs as well. For a moment, Feena felt crushed, hemmed in like a sheep in a pen, even though she could have swung her arms wide without so much as touching anyone. She froze.

Julith took her arm and drew her gently onward.

As the stairs rose into the open again, she spoke to another footman. The servant cleared his voice and announced, "Moonmistress-Designate Feena Archwood and High Initiate Priestess Julith Harkspur of Moonshadow Hall!"

Feena climbed the last few steps and the night opened up around her. Below the perfect, delicate bow of Selune's waning crescent, more lanterns shone on the raised flower beds and tiled paths of a garden terrace. Along the paths and among the beds strolled the wealthy and powerful of Yhaunn, the crystalline music of flutes and harps mingling with the buzz of their conversations. A few men and women, those closest to the stairs, looked up idly at the footman's announcement—then looked again as they caught sight of

Feena.
She could understand their awe. When she first looked in a mirror after Julith had finished dressing her, she'd hardly been able to recognize her own reflection.
Gone were the frilly blue dresses with layered crinolines that Dhauna Myritar favored and that Velsinore had insisted on squeezing Feena into. Julith had summoned a proper dressmaker to Moonshadow Hall. Feena wore a slim gown of moon-pale white silk with silver embroidery traced along the hem and across the bodice. Long, tapered sleeves covered her arms and ended in pointed, silver-trimmed cuffs that extended across the backs of her hands. The high, starched lace collars that scratched her neck were gone as well, replaced with a light stole that draped softly across her shoulders. Instead of ridiculous slippers, she wore solid shoes of
tooled white leather with heels that lent her an imposingly noble height. Julith had brushed her hair until it shone, then dipped deep into the neglected recesses of Moonshadow Hall's regalia chests. The moon's road tiara and the silver circlets with their heavy representations of Selune's phases had remained at the temple. Instead, Feena's flaming hair was caught back with a web of silver filigree from which a crescent-carved opal hung over the center of her forehead.
The merchants nearest to her bowed in respect. Feena nodded in return.
"Strictly speaking, you didn't have to do that," whispered Julith as they swept past them.
"I know," Feena said. She squeezed Julith's hand then released it and raised her chin in confidence.
Heads turned as they walked through the gardens. Those few among the party guests who had met Feena before her transformation generally wore expressions of astonishment. Colle Shoondeep actually smiled at her and nodded before doing a comical double take and scowling furiously. Endress Halatar, the elderly high priestess of Lliira, goddess of joy,

grinned, however, and shook her hands, holding her in pleasant conversation for several minutes.
"What's she doing now?" Feena asked Julith as they walked away.
Julith turned her head discretely.
"It looks like she's talking to one of her junior priests and a couple of merchants about you," she said. The young priestess smiled. "I think she's impressed!"
People who hadn't met Feena before seemed eager to accept her. Julith ushered her from group to group, murmuring names and information about important people.
"Diero Mivaldi—he runs a trading business between Yhaunn and the Vilhon Reach," she whispered and Feena exchanged a few words about sea conditions with the dark-skinned man in a green vest. "Betha Horndriver— she was playing the harp just now." Feena praised the young woman for her skill.
"Arthagus of the Miracles—he
has friends on the Merchants'Council of Sembia." She shook hands with the thin and trembling wizard.
As Feena discussed the summer heat with a master craftsman from Yhaunn's fantastically spired Glass-crafter's Hall, a man stepped up beside her. Feena felt a warning nudge from Julith and glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He was somewhat older than her, with hair that was showing signs of gray, but his face was strong and his shoulders, attractively broad. His clothes were dark and plain but well-cut. He looked like he should have been carrying a sword and she had a distinct feeling that she had met him before.
When her small talk with the glass crafter ebbed and the master craftsman drifted away, he said, "You look lovely tonight, Moonmistress."
Feena was the one who did a double take then, though she managed to turned it into what she hoped was a graceful nod.
"As do you, Guard Captain Manas," she replied, then winced

at the words and saw Julith cringe as well.
Manas managed a chuckle. "It seems we both clean up well." He was carrying two goblets of wine and offered her one. "I think I'm as surprised to find you here as you are to find me."
"True enough." Feena accepted the wine and took a sip. It was watered. She raised an eyebrow and Manas gave her a small smile.
"Attendance at these parties is the price you pay for attaining a certain rank in Yhaunn," he said. "Judging from the way your aide has been guiding you through the crowd —" he nodded to Julith—"I suspected you might have been given the same instructions I once was."
Feena returned the smile. "Thank you for your courtesy," she said.
Manas's lip twitched. "Your appearance isn't the only thing that's changed since we met," he observed. "Before, I would have said that your speech and manners were straight out of the country. Does Yhaunn really change people so quickly?"
"Not on its own," Feena confessed. "I've been taking lessons."
"She's a fast learner," added Julith.
"I can see that." Manas glanced down at his wine. He hesitated for a moment, then said somewhat awkwardly, "I wanted to tell you that I admired the conviction with which you stood up to me and High Luck Shoondeep, Moonmistress. I can tell that you're a fighter. I know how hard it can be when you're thrown into a situation that puts words over actions."
Feena blinked. "I..." she stuttered—then met Manas' eyes as he looked back up.
Both of them flushed and glanced away.
Julith stepped into the conversation smoothly: "Have your investigations turned up any other clues about the death in the Stiltways, Captain?"
"No, ma'am," Manas replied as promptly as he would have to

a superior in the city guard.
Feena could hear the relief in his voice at the change in topic. She had to admit that she felt a certain relief as well.
"Are there any indications of another werewolf in the city?" she asked.
Manas shook his head and replied, "No. We haven't been able to figure out why the man was in the Stiltways, either. He only had a few friends we've been able to locate, but they say that the Stiltways isn't somewhere they'd expect him to be. Apparently he pretty much kept to himself."
"If you find out more," Feena said, "will you let me know?" Her voice came out with a breathless rush. She snapped her teeth together, but of course she couldn't recall the words. "If there is another werewolf involved...." she added quickly, but the flush had already sprung back to Manas's face.
"You'll be the first to know, Moonmistress!" he said. He bobbed his head in a hasty bow. "If you'll excuse me, I... I see someone I need to talk to."
Manas turned and darted away down the nearest path.
Julith looked at Feena and smiled knowingly. Feena flushed again as well and gulped from her goblet. "It's your fault," she said.
Julith snickered, "You both just clean up too well for your own good, I suppose." She looked after Manas. "And he appreciates you as a fighter. I think I'd spar with him for a few rounds." She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. Feena groaned.
"Who's the bad influence now? Let's just move on." Feena looked around and gestured to a trio, an older man and woman and a second, younger man, strolling along a path well away from the one Manas had taken. "Who's that?"
Julith looked, nodded, and said, "Strasus Thingoleir, possibly the greatest wizard in the city. That's his wife, Dagnalla, also a wizard. The young man is likely one of their sons—either Roderio or Keph." She led Feena toward them. "Master Thingoleir!" she called. "Mistress Thingoleir!" The old couple

stopped and turned. Julith bent respectfully and gestured to Feena. "May I present Moonmistress-Designate Feena Archwood of Moonshadow Hall."
Strasus smiled kindly and extended a wrinkled, leathery hand. "Well met, Moonmistress."
Feena took it and smiled back as Strasus gave a little bow over their joined hands.
"Well met, sir." She shook Dagnalla's hand as well. "Well met, madam."
She turned to the young man. He nodded to her soberly and reached out his hand as well.
"Roderio Thingoleir," he said. "Well met."
The skin of his hand was smooth and very soft when she took it. His face had the same soft look as well—the aftereffect of massive magical healing, Feena realized. She wondered what had happened to him.
"Well met," she said. She looked back to Strasus and Dagnalla. "And your other son, is he here tonight as well?"
The smiles on the old wizards' faces faltered, turning thin and strained.
"I'm afraid Keph seldom attends events such as this," Dagnalla said. Her voice was flat, and Strasus's eyes filled with a deep sadness.
Feena cursed herself silently. It didn't take a wolfs nose to know she'd stepped into a dung heap.
"I'm sorry to hear that," she said. "Perhaps another time." She fell back on Julith's advice and asked, "How is your research, madam? What are you working on?"
Dagnalla glanced to her husband and a little life struggled back into Strasus's eyes.
"Historical research," he said. "A cache of artifacts recovered from the depths of one of the tunnels in Yhaunn's cliff walls." He swept his hand around them, taking in the bowl of the city, his voice gaining strength as he warmed to his subject. "Few people realize how ancient the quarry that gave birth to Yhaunn truly is. Most historians date the first settlement

here to about a thousand years ago, roughly concurrent with the establishment in the 380s of the Chondathan colonies that would become Selgaunt and Saerloon. However, it's known that humans, refugees from the devastation of Jhaamdath to the south, were colonizing the Dalelands to the northwest almost five hundred years before that and it seems highly unlikely that such a vast source of fine quality stone as originated here should be entirely ignored. In fact, I've found supporting architectural evidence for this in Westgate, where a monument erected by the city's ruler about fifty years before the beginning of Dalereckoning is constructed of what is clearly Yhauntan stone."

Feena struggled to keep an interested smile on her face. Hadn't Julith warned her that could happen? Unfortunately, the dark-haired priestess was actually listening to Strasus's tale with interest. Feena couldn't very well tear herself away.

"And the artifacts you're studying?" she asked.

Strasus stroked his beard and said, "Well, that's the really fascinating thing. Almost three hundred and fifty years before Dalereckoning, the northern empire
of Netheril fell—quite literally. The floating cities that were its greatest achievement dropped out of the sky in a moment of terrible catastrophe. There were survivors among ground-based settlements, of course, but the last cities of Netheril faded over the following centuries as the Anauroch Desert expanded and swallowed them. The last survivor-state, Hlondath, was abandoned to the sands in 329 or the year 4188 by Netherese reckoning."

Strasus's eyes were fully alive again, any hint of Feena's gaffe clearly forgotten. Feena was afraid, however, that she was about to make another. She scanned the gardens, looking for a way to escape the old wizard as Strasus droned on.

"The artifacts that were brought to me recently are clearly Netherese and had apparently lain undisturbed since they were deposited in the deep tunnel where they were found.

What interests me is when they were placed or lost and—"
Dagnalla chuckled and interrupted her husband with an elbow in the ribs. "What interests you is the Netherese magic!"
"Well, that goes without saying," grunted Strasus, "but the implications for Yhaunn's history...."
From the corner of her eye, Feena spotted a pair of figures standing a little way off, watching them. Watching her. Lantern light shone on a stark gray robe and glinted off silver hair. Velsinore and Mifano! Feena cursed silently. If she and Julith broke off conversation with the Thingoleirs, the priest and priestess would be down on them like vultures.
Dagnalla, however, had followed her furtive gaze. She must have recognized the clerical vestments that Mifano and Velsinore wore because she cut Strasus off with another elbow.
"My dear, enough with your history. The Moonmistress-Designate has followers waiting to speak with her." She nodded to Feena and said, "A delight to meet you."
Feena's silent curse turned into a blasphemy. At her side, she could feel Julith stiffen as she spotted Mifano and Velsinore as well.
"No, please go on," Feena said, but Strasus was already sighing and nodding.
"I'm sorry," he apologized, "I tend to get carried away. Another time?"
Roderio and Dagnalla drew him away, and Feena blinked numbly.
"The best of luck with your research," she called after them, the response drilled into her by Julith. "When you complete it, I hope you'll call on me at Moonshadow Hall and present the results!"
There were footsteps behind her. She turned to face Velsinore and Mifano. Neither looked pleased.
"I didn't expect to see you here," Mifano commented with a scowl. He looked her up and down. "You've got a new dress."

Velsinore scowled as well, but her eyes were fixed on the filigree web in Feena's hair and the opal crescent hanging against her forehead. "Who gave you approval to go through the regalia chests?" she seethed.
Feena gave Julith a fast glance, then drew herself up tall and lifted her chin boldly.
"The same person who authorized the expense of a new gown, Velsinore. Me. Isn't it my right and duty as Moonmistress-Designate to dress in a manner that does credit to Selune and Moonshadow Hall?"
Mifano's eyes narrowed at the sound of confidence in her voice, but Velsinore didn't even pause.
"That... cobweb is two hundred years old! It hasn't been worn in a generation. Mother Dhauna wouldn't touch it!"
"I'm not Mother Dhauna," said Feena. "The tiara and circlets that she wore belong to her generation. This—" She touched the opal crescent, "—is a fine piece of our temple's history. It should be worn proudly."
Velsinore gasped. "I'm in charge of Moonshadow Hall's internal affairs!" she spat. "The regalia is in my keeping as part of the temple's treasury."
"The regalia isn't part of the treasury, Velsinore," Julith said. The dark-haired priestess stood firm at Feena's side. "It isn't an account. It can't be spent or sold or traded for food or supplies for the infirmary. It doesn't fall under the purview of the Waning Crescent. It's entirely within the charge of the High Moonmistress." She inclined her head toward Feena. "And her designated successor."
Velsinore turned such a violent shade of red that Feena thought she might give herself a nosebleed. Mifano, however, remained tense and cold.
"Speaking of the High Moonmistress," he commented, "who is watching over Dhauna Myritar tonight?"
"No one is 'watching over' her, Mifano," Feena said as she turned to look at the priest. "I gave Jhezzail a break from the gate and asked her to stay close to Mother Dhauna's

quarters in case she needed anything. I also," she added before he could raise another objection, "told Chandri that we would be out, just in case the infirmary was needed."
Mifano's lips pressed together. "The assignment of gate duty," he said thinly, "is my charge."
"As the infirmary is mine!" snarled Velsinore.
Feena took a deep breath. Moonmaiden favor me, she prayed silently—and looked down on both of them.
"And 7," she reminded them, "am the Moonmistress-Designate, heir to the High Moonmistress and entrusted with her responsibilities." The wolf within her stirred, but she held it back, allowing only the force of authority to enter her voice. "You say you've sent to Waterdeep and the House of the Moon for advice on Mother Dhauna's condition. You haven't had a response yet, have you?"
Neither Velsinore nor Mifano responded.
Feena raised an eyebrow and continued, "No? Then until you hear back, I think you should accept Mother Dhauna's decisions—and mine."
Velsinore glowered at the ground, but Mifano glared at her, two spots of color high on his cheeks. Feena met his glare and waited. Finally, he looked down and gave her a stiff bow.
"As you wish, Moonmistress," he growled under his breath.
"I'm glad we spoke," said Feena. She stepped around the priest and priestess, her fine gown swaying around her feet as she walked confidently down the tiled path. Julith followed her without a word until they turned a corner and were out of sight of the two—then she let out a long breath.
"Feena..." she began in awe.
Feena held up a hand. "Don't say it." She groaned and sagged, stopping for a moment to catch her breath, then said, "Moonmaiden's grace, if the House of the Moon speaks against Dhauna, they'll turn me out faster than a burned griddlecake." She glanced up at Julith. "I don't think you'll be especially welcome either."
"If that's the way Mifano and Velsinore choose to act," Julith

replied, "I'll stay while Mother Dhauna needs me and no longer." She surveyed the party. "Do you feel up to going on? You're doing very well tonight."
"Aside from acting like a girl around Manas, coming close to walking away from Strasus Thingoleir out of boredom, and causing a scene with Mifano and Velsinore...?"
"No," Julith said, "in spite of that. Strasus and Dagnalla Thingoleir, Endress Halatar, Arthagus of the Miracles—none of them are fools, Feena, but they all respected the Moonmistress-Designate."
She stepped back a pace and bowed. Feena drew a deep breath.
"Moonmaiden's grace," she said again, "they did, didn't they?" Feena felt warm and confident all through her body. "And Mifano and Velsinore?"
"Have been put in their place," said Julith.
"Bright Mother of Night. Thank you, Julith." She straightened up. "But I think that's enough. The Moonmistress-Designate has had her evening and can retire for the night with dignity."
"The Moonmistress-Designate—but not Feena," Julith said, and made a face as they turned toward the entrance to the garden terrace, the stairs back down to the street,
and the waiting carriage. "You'll still go back to the Stiltways?"
"I need to get out," said Feena. "Especially after that." She tossed her head in the direction of Velsinore and Mifano. "Besides, you heard what Manas said. The city guard knows nothing more about the Sharran. They don't even know he was a Sharran. I have to try to find out more."
"You could go to Manas with what you know. I think he'd appreciate it."
Feena gave her a dark glance, and Julith shrugged.
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They had brought Feena's linen blouse, homespun skirt, and sandals with them in the carriage. As they rattled along,

Julith helped Feena slip carefully out of the gown and into her own clothes. Feena sighed and rubbed the silk of the gown between her fingers.
"I don't think I've ever worn a dress this fine before in my life."
"I'm sure it won't be your last chance," Julith said. She folded the dress, then held out a velvet bag.
Feena exchanged the silver filigree and opal crescent for her plain chain and battered medallion, hiding the medallion under her blouse.
"How do I look?" she asked.
Julith grinned and reached out to mess up her hair. Feena spluttered, brushing hair out of her face. "And now?"
"I wouldn't let you into my party," said the younger priestess, her lips pressed together. "Moonmaiden watch over you, Feena." She reached up and banged on the carriage roof. "Driver, slow down!"
"I'll be back by dawn," Feena promised.
As the carriage slowed to a walk, she opened the door and hopped out carefully. The driver twisted around and gawked at her, but Julith rapped on the roof and ordered him to pick up the pace once more. Feena turned away
from the carriage and down a street that led toward the chaos of the Stiltways.
She trotted through the streets in silence. It felt good to be out on her own again. Even with Julith's support and quiet suggestions over the past several days, even with her performance that night, Moonshadow Hall had started to wear on her once more. Ceremonies, rituals, prayers, meetings with the temple staff, meetings with important followers of Selune—even when she had left most of those things to Velsinore and Mifano, it appeared there were responsibilities she couldn't delegate away. Thanks had been delivered to the temple on behalf of the ruling council and the Nessarch, Yhaunn's mayor, for the swift action that had prevented an epidemic of disease in the slums. Feena

had been forced to stand and accept the honor, though Mifano had somehow arranged to make it seem that the idea was entirely his. Velsinore was busy preparing for the New Moon Beneficence, only a few days away, and seemed to want Feena's official approval on every last detail, even though she'd clearly gone ahead with everything beforehand.

If there had been any benefit to the night's confrontation with the tall priestess, Feena hoped, maybe it would be that Velsinore would stop bothering her. How had Mother Dhauna put up with the woman?

Feena clenched her teeth. And there was Dhauna. The High Moonmistress had woken on the morning after her seizure claiming no memories of the event. Mifano and Velsinore had given Feena knowing looks. Even in private, Feena hadn't been able to coax Dhauna into admitting that anything had happened. Julith, however, reported that she was skimming through materials in the temple archives with a new and frantic energy.

There would be answers within a tenday, Dhauna had promised. Feena was beginning to doubt that.

She'd had no time to look into the threat of Sharran activity. When she raised the issue again with Mifano, couching it in the most diplomatic terms she could
manage, he had once more denied the possible existence of a cult of the dark goddess in Yhaunn.

"We'd know, Feena," he'd said. "Sharrans can't hide themselves forever. Shar thrives on sacrifices and wicked deeds. We watch for those but we've seen nothing out of the ordinary." He'd given her a sideways glance. "Except for a suspiciously mauled body in the Stiltways, that is."

Feena had said failed to respond.

Her chances of finding any clues almost five nights later, after Manas and the city guard had already surveyed the area, Were questionable. As she'd told Julith, though, she had to at least try. Velsinore had mocked her for leaving the

Selunite battle against Shar to fight the bloody followers of Malar, but it didn't seem as if Moonshadow Hall was trying very hard in the battle against Shar either. There was something more to be found, something more going on than either Mifano or Velsinore knew about—Feena was certain of it.

And while she missed the keen insight that her wolf-shape's nose gave her, there were places two legs could go that four could not. She would enter the Stiltways as a woman.

The district was busier than it had been before. Its lower levels seemed darker as well. Feena paused in the shadows to let her eyes adjust and to get her bearings, then plunged onward. While her departure from the Stiltways the last time had been hasty and furtive in an attempt to conceal her monstrous hybrid wolf-woman form, she had taken care to make note of landmarks. Even so, her progress through the darkness of the Stiltways's streets was haphazard. She was forced to backtrack several times. She clenched her teeth. Manas had said the Sharran's friends claimed he hadn't frequented the Stiltways. When she'd followed the man, however, he'd moved quickly and with purpose. Even if he hadn't frequented the mazy district, he'd been more than familiar with the route to the well.

Feena stayed alert as she walked, not just for the human predators and denizens of the Stiltways, but for
signs of more monstrous presences, the kind of creatures that might maul a body. Especially the kind that would maul a body with poison flowing through it. Over the past several days, shed given the question a lot of thought. It was possible that feral dogs had done the damage, but they would have smelled the poison on the Sharran just as she had and shied away. More unnatural predators might not have minded the poison, but she hadn't caught the scent of any such creatures before. Was it another werewolf, or other lycanthrope, as Manas had suggested? It was possible, but unlikely—Feena couldn't understand why any intelligent

creature would risk poisoning itself just to ravage a corpse.
Unless someone had deliberately set out to make the Sharran's death look more violent than it really had been and to pin that violence on her. In which case, who and why? She couldn't believe that even Velsinore or Mifano, as much as they disliked her, would stoop to such a thing.
She found the tiny courtyard and the well. Just as before, the area was deserted. Scooping up a pebble, Feena murmured a prayer to Selune. A thread of divine energy shivered through her fingers. When she opened her fist, the pebble shone with the light of a full moon. She cupped her hand so that the light shone only downward and played it across the ground. The courtyard was paved with broad flagstones, broken and uneven with time. Dirt and dust blurred its corners, and mingled with a scattering of broken crockery.
There was only the faintest of stains where the Sharran had fallen. Her human nose wasn't as sensitive as her wolf nose, but even so, she could smell only the residue of poisoned blood. She looked closer. A wide patch of the cracked stone paving was cleaner than elsewhere in the courtyard and the dust around it was streaked and pocked by water. Some well-meaning soul had tried to wash away the offense of the man's death, probably with the very water he had been trying to taint. Feena shined her light on the dust and dirt. The only tracks
she saw were the prints of boots and sandals. She sighed and looked around the courtyard, then turned her gaze upward to the walkways and platforms above it.
Two levels up, light glimmered and rough sounds of merriment drifted down—the backside of a tavern, she guessed. She stepped all the way to the opposite side of the courtyard and peered closely at the wall, risking an upward flash of her magical light. It barely reached that high, but she could make out long, wet stains streaking the wall—and the figure of a man who staggered and slurred obscenities, twisting around to peer over his shoulder as the faint light

caught him. Feena flicked the light back down and wrinkled her nose. The tavern's toilet facilities, such as they were, overlooked the courtyard.

It was a place to start. Some regular patron of the tavern might have seen or heard something to give her a clue. She dismissed the light with a whisper and waited for her eyes to adjust again, then slipped back out onto the street and looked for a way up. A simple ladder two buildings over led up one level; a steep plank ramp led up another. She doubled back along a narrow, creaking platform and found the front of the tavern. It was hardly an inspiring sight. Narrow windows, any glass in them long since broken away, spilled light and the blue smoke of pipeweed into the night. The door of the place had been a window at some point in the past—a frame of rough wood covered the rounded edges of long broken bricks. The narrow alley that led to the courtyard reeked of urine. The tavern didn't smell any better.

And only a short time ago, Feena thought, I was walking in a beautiful garden and shaking hands with the great and glorious of Yhaunn.

She crinkled her nose and stepped through the open door.

In spite of its appearance and odor, the tavern was packed with customers. A few glanced at her—some wearily, some suspiciously, some with an unnerving las-civiousness—but most ignored her presence. The crowd was a surprising mix of rogues off the streets, sailors up
from the docks, respectable craftsmen, and well-dressed merchants, all of them squeezed in and sweating together. A bard was giving a raucous performance in one corner. In another, a big, muscular woman in shining bracers was arm-wrestling a burly dwarf to the encouragement of the crowd. Their chants— "Lahumbra! Lahumbra!"— mixed with the screeching of the bard to create quite a din. Feena forced her way through, trying to guess who might be a likely patron to have witnessed something in the courtyard.

She settled on an old man wedged into a corner near the thick plank that served as the bar. He looked as comfortable as if he had grown there, but his eyes were bright and sharp, not addled with too much ale. She stepped in close to him.
"Good evening to you, sir!" she said over the noise of the tavern.
His eyes went wide and Feena bit her tongue. She'd gotten too used to speaking in the stilted, precise register of a high priestess. She forced her voice back to its normal tones.
"Well met, old father!"
The man's long eyebrows twitched. "Well met, young daughter." He switched the stem of a clay pipe to the other side of his mouth as his eyes traveled slowly up and down her body. Feena fought back an urge to growl at him. He sighed regretfully. "Lass, if I were thirty years younger, your virtue would be in danger."
She gave him a sharp-toothed smile. "Really?" she asked. "From what?"
The old man choked on his pipe smoke and let out a long, rattling laugh.
"Well, aren't you a shark out of water," he wheezed after a moment. His eyes fixed on her face. "Eyes like an angel, tongue like a guard. You've got questions, don't you?"
"Is it that obvious?"
"When anyone comes into the Cutter's Dip and doesn't belly up to the bar first thing, they've got questions." His
pipe switched sides again and smoke drifted out of his mouth with his words. "But you're lucky. I've got nothing to hide, especially from a woman as lovely as you." His eyes began to wander downward again. "Ask away, daughter, ask away."
Feena ground her teeth and crossed her arms over her bosom. The old man puffed smoke in disappointment. Feena drove straight to the point.
"The walkway behind this place—it looks over a courtyard," she said. "I'm trying to find someone who might have seen

anything happen there five nights ago."
The man's pipe drooped in his teeth, then snapped up as he clenched his jaw. His fingers made a sign against evil.
"Beshaba's ivory arms," he hissed. "Are you mad? It was a werewolf—tore a man to bits down there."
"I've heard that," Feena said. "I'm looking for more information. If anyone was back there and looked down or if anyone in here heard anything, I'd like to know."
"Listen for yourself, girl! You can't hear from one side of this place to the other!" The old man reached for a mug of ale with a trembling hand. "I was in here that night. Sat right here while a man was slaughtered not sixty feet away. If I'd gone out to have a splash at the wrong time, that could have been me down there!" He gulped from his mug.
"Here, Noyle, what's wrong?"
The barkeep leaned over sharply. Other patrons standing by the bar turned to look as well. Before she knew it, the old man had become the center of attention, and Feena along with him.
"The wolf of the Stiltways," Noyle moaned. He glared at Feena. "I don't know what a woman like you would be doing looking for a beast like that, daughter, but let me tell you— I've a friend and his grandson's wife saw the monster prowling that night." He slammed his mug down. "Aye, she chanced to be awake and look down from her window as it stalked out of the Stiltways, its fur slick and red with blood by the full moon's light, and in its claws—"
he stuck out his hand, his fingers curled up—"it carried the heart of its victim!"
Feena swallowed. The Sharran's flask, of course, and her own russet fur, altered by the sleepless woman's tales— She ran her tongue around her lips.
"Actually, the full moon was a tenday ago," she said awkwardly.
All eyes turned to her. Noyle shook his curled fingers under her nose.

"Have some respect for a murdered man, girl!" he said. "By the twin gauntlets of Torm and Helm, I hope that when they catch that monster they stretch its skin over Yhaunn's gates and sink its bloody corpse in the harbor!"
"Here, here!" cheered the spectators around the bar.
A shudder of discomfort ran down Feena's back. As the spectators raised their mugs and drank, she slipped away.
Or tried to. Her back bumped up against a man's firm chest.
"Well, would you look at this, Drik! It's our feisty missus from the other night!" Hands spun her around and Feena found herself staring into Stag's leering face. He bared his teeth in a nasty smile. "Well met, red bird! Going to show us your legs again?"
Feena clenched her jaw, hissed, "With pleasure!"— and jabbed her knee up at Stag's groin.
The bandit twisted deftly out of the way.
"Not this time, red bird," he said. "Not so easy to surprise us when we know you've got fight in you."
He shoved her back hard and another pair of hands clutched at her—Drik. She slapped at him, but he ducked. Her blow clipped another man across the back of the head.
"Hey!" the bystander snapped, and spun around to glare at her.
"Your pardon, sir," Feena gasped quickly in her most polite high priestess voice.
She tried to duck around the man, but Drik was already there, boxing her in.
"Not going to leave so soon, are you?" he asked.
There was movement behind her as Stag closed
again. Feena flung an elbow at him, but once again he just stepped out of the way and she was forced pull back or hit someone else. In the moment that she hesitated, Stag popped up inside her reach. He grabbed her arm and twisted it, bringing her into a close, painful embrace. She snapped at him but he only leaned away and laughed. She tried to wrench free, but his grip was too strong.

"Let me go," Feena spat, "or I'll scream so loud everyone in this bar will hear me!"
"Sing your lungs out, missus," Stag said with a nasty grin. "This isn't a country clearing." He nudged the man Feena had accidentally slapped. "Is it, Kor?"
The man turned and glared again. "Some of us are drinking, Stag," he growled, then looked away as if utterly unconcerned with Feena's captivity. Her eyes widened.
"See, red bird," cooed Stag, "this's our own pretty little clearing right here. No one's going to bother us."
He started to tug her toward the back of the bar, and Drik stepped forward to take her other side.
As the second bandit closed, Feena reared back against Stag and kicked out at Drik with both feet. The blow connected, and Drik stumbled into Kor, who roared in frustration. When he whirled around, beer dripped from his face. He cuffed Drik hard with a meaty fist. Startled, Stag relaxed his hold on Feena. She twisted half free of him and leaned toward the corner of the bar.
"Noyle!" she shouted. "Noyle!"
The old man looked up from his story. His eyebrows rose. Other people swung around as well, just as Stag grabbed for her again, trying to pull her back into his grasp. Drik was rising, too, an ugly look of rage burning on his face. He grabbed her free arm and used it as leverage to drive a punch against her chin. Feena's head snapped back.
"Torm and Helm!" Noyle gasped.
Through a brief wash of bright pain, Feena saw him start up from his chair and turn to face Stag. She started to pull herself away from the bandit—
"She's the one who beat you down?" asked Noyle.
Feena froze. Stag's hand tightened on her right arm.
"She's the one," the bandit said. "Fights like a demon and twice as dirty."
"Stag and me were lucky to get away," Drik chimed in, seizing her left arm. "She charmed us like fools with her

country girl act, then turned on us faster than you could pick a pocket. That's probably what she had in mind for you too, Noyle."
The old man flinched back. Drik twisted Feena's arm painfully.
She gasped and growled but Stag jabbed her hard under the ribs before she could say anything. The blow left her struggling to suck air into her lungs and would have doubled her over if the two bandits hadn't been holding her up.
"Got to be careful of her," Stag said. "She's got some kind of magic, too."
Noyle pulled away in alarm and said, "She's probably some kind of wild hedge mage." He spat on the floor in her direction. "Beshaba's arms hold you, bitch!"
Feena managed to get her breath back.
Moonmaiden's grace, Feena, she cursed, you picked a fine tavern to start poking around in, didn't you?
She fought back the rising fear that surged in her belly. Selune's magic wasn't going to help her. Drik and Stag would stop her at the first sign of a spell. Anywhere else, she might even have considered changing shape—her hybrid form was strong and fierce enough to take on four men or more—but in this place? If she revealed herself as a werewolf, she'd be facing an angry mob.
Stag and Drik couldn't have the entire tavern on their side, could they? Bright Lady of the Night favor me, she prayed.
She twisted around as best she could and screamed over her shoulder, "Help me! Somebody help me!"
A few people looked up, startled, but friends held them back. Others glanced at her, then laughed.
"Now, didn't I say no one would bother us, red bird?" sneered Stag. "You know, there's a reason people are afraid to come down here after dark." He grinned at his partner. "Hey Drik, let's show missus how alone she really is!"
Drik's face split in a horrid smile. "Aye, Stag!" His voice rose.

"Dip's stagger!" he shouted out.
His call got more attention than Feena's scream. All around the tavern, people shouted back eagerly as they turned to face the bandits and their captive. Stag and Drik hauled roughly on Feena's arms.
"One!" they cried, swinging her back toward the crowd. Feena fought to stay on her feet.
"Two!" chanted the crowd in response.
The bandits pulled her forward.
"Three!"
Stag and Drik swung Feena back again and let go. Feena reeled free, arms flailing as she struggled for balance. She slammed straight into the big woman who had been arm-wrestling the dwarf—and gasped as the woman shoved her away again.
"Dip!" the woman roared merrily.
Feena spun a few feet and hit someone else, a gap-toothed merchant.
"Stagger!" he yelled and pushed her as well.
"Dip!"
"Stagger!"
The crowd shifted and flowed around Feena, never allowing her more than a few steps before she hit or was caught by someone and sent staggering on her way. Beer splashed, drenching her. She didn't have a chance to catch her breath or recapture her balance. There was certainly no chance for a prayer. Even the wolf within her was whining in fear—she couldn't have changed form if she wanted to. Wild-eyed, she tried to drop, tried to dart between the legs of the crowd and make for the door. Stag's hands caught her.
"No, no, red bird!" he laughed and gave her a hard shove back into the chanting crowd. Other hands twirled her around and around, tossing her across the bar.
The dwarf whirled into her field of vision. Feena heard him guffaw over the tavern's din.
"Dip!" he bellowed and swung a shoulder against her hips.

Her torso kept going forward. Arms outstretched, she rolled helplessly over the dwarfs shoulder, bounced off a table, and landed hard in someone's lap. A goblet spun away with a ring and clash of cheap metal. Spilled wine pattered around her like rain.

She looked up at a man with light brown hair and a soft goatee. He was well dressed, though wine soaked his clothes. His face was young—he was easily ten years Feena's junior—but there was a hardness to his eyes that aged him. His mouth was set in a thin line. He looked down at his stained clothes, then at her—and up.

The crowd went silent. Feena blinked her eyes back into focus in time to see the tavern's patrons part to leave a clear space between the man who held her and Stag. The bandit's eyes were narrow.

"Give her here, Keph," he growled.

"Why should I?" The young man—Keph—curled an arm around Feena's shoulders. "I might just keep her."

Drik snickered. The young man's gaze darted to him and the bandit fell silent. He moved to Stag's side, both men watching Keph.

"I hear you think you're a bad man now," Stag said. "You still look like a spoiled brat to me. Maybe you want to just step back before you get hurt."

"And maybe when the two of you are finished taking on a farmer's wife, Stag," Keph replied, "you'll be ready to face a real opponent."

Stag's face flushed. "I'll take on both of you by myself!"

The crowd pulled back even farther, making a wide ring in the middle of the tavern. Keph glanced down at Feena.

"Do you mind a little help?" he drawled with mock courtesy.

"Not at all," Feena replied. She pushed herself to her feet and bared her teeth. "Watch out for Drik. He's not going to stay out of this."

Keph's eyes betrayed surprise, as if he hadn't expected such rage to pour out of her, but he rose and stepped to her

side. He wore a rapier on his hip, though he didn't draw it. Stag was already moving, strutting forward confidently but watching them both closely while Drik moved around to the side. The crowd began calling out to all four of them, taking sides and cheering. Feena took a step toward Stag, and so did Keph.
"Take care of Drik!" Feena hissed at him.
"You take care of Drik. Stag's mine."
Keph circled around the bandit, hard eyes locked on him. Stag froze, not sure which opponent to focus on. Growling, Feena took the choice away from him. She dived past Keph to throw a punch at Stag.
He got an arm up and blocked her blow, then swung his other in a backhand that forced her to leap away.
"Hey!" snapped Keph. "I said he's mine!"
He started to move in. Out of the corner of her eye, Feena caught movement and tried to shout a warning as Drik jumped into the fray, but she was too slow. The second bandit wrapped his arms around Keph's chest and heaved him off his feet. The crowd cheered wildly.
The moment of distraction cost her as well. Stag's fist seemed to snake out of nowhere and snap into her jaw. The punch spun her halfway around and knocked her to the floor.
"You're a lot of trouble, red bird!" Stag growled as he drew a foot back to kick her.
Feena threw herself away and came up beside Drik and Keph. The young man was struggling ferociously against Drik's embrace, but the bandit just kept squeezing tighter. Feena rolled up to her knees and drove a punch hard into Drik's kidneys. He gasped and stumbled. As soon as Keph's feet touched the ground, he hunched forward sharply, tumbling Drik over his shoulders. Drik didn't loosen his embrace, however. For a heartbeat, the two men stood twined, then Drik went over, pulling Keph after him. They sprawled across the floor, both stunned, as the crowd jeered.
Feena scrambled to her feet and swung around to face Stag

once more. The bandit was
circling her, fists ready. She took a slow step away from where Drik and Keph lay.
"Trouble?" she asked. "You don't know the half of it." She gestured for him with both hands. "Come and get me."
Stag took a cautious pace forward. Feena glanced down.
"Keph! Yours!"
On the floor at Stag's feet, Keph looked up. He grinned viciously and his hands snapped out to grab at the bandit's leg. Stag stumbled, surprised. Feena darted forward, grasped the fabric of his shirt, and slammed her knee into his groin. Stag let out a horrible rattling gasp and stiffened.
"Bitch!"
Still holding Stag upright, Feena spun around. Drik was up in a crouch, one leg stretched out, the other bent in front of him. Sharp metal glinted in his hand. A throwing knife. His arm drew back...
Keph twisted over onto his side, pulled a leg in, then kicked out hard. His booted foot hammered straight into Drik's bent knee with a bone-splintering crunch. Drik shrieked and the knife tumbled from his fingers as he toppled over, clutching his leg.
For a moment, the crowd held its breath, then erupted in a roar of appreciation for the brawl.
Keph pushed himself up and rose to his feet. Feena glanced at Stag. The bandit's eyes had rolled back and he was making rasping, choking noises that flecked his lips with foamy saliva. She shoved him into Keph's arms.
"I'm done," she said over the noise of the crowd. "Your turn."
The young man pushed Stag to the floor, grabbing her instead and pulling her close.
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Keph felt the red-haired wildcat's body stiffen in alarm as he drew her in.
"Easy!" he hissed before she got the wrong idea—he didn't want to try fighting her on his own. "We're not out of danger

yet."
He spun her around toward the door of the Cutter's Dip. Between them and it were big Kor, wily old Noyle, half-mad Lahumbra, and a few other thugs. None of them looked happy.
"Those are Stag and Drik's friends," he whispered in the woman's ear. "They'll cool down later, but if we want to get out of here now, we'd best go together."
The woman's eyes narrowed and she nodded. Keph led the way toward the door. The woman didn't try to challenge him. Hands reaching out to touch and congratulate them, the crowd parted easily. The woman flinched back—after a round of Dip's Stagger, Keph thought, who could blame her?—but he accepted the congratulations and shook hands easily. As they drifted past the bar, the thugs were forced back away from them by the press of people, but he heard Noyle hiss out a warning.
"Best not be coming back to the Cutter's Dip any time soon!"
The woman started to twist angrily. Keph held his grip on her and kept them moving.
"Bad odds," he muttered to her. "You can get back at them another time."
A moment later, they were through the tavern's door and out on the platforms of the Stiltways. Keph walked a short distance away from the Cutter's Dip, then let out a breath and released his hold on the woman.
"What did you do to get Stag and Drik so mad at you?" he asked her.
"They tried to rob me a tenday ago," she said bluntly. "I objected." She jerked her head at the door of the Dip. "This was just... unlucky. Thank you for your help."
Keph couldn't hold back a disdainful snort.
Dark, he thought, if Jarull and the other cultists saw this____
"Don't thank me," he told her. "If Stag had held his tongue, I would have given you back to him."

The woman looked at him with disgust. "I guess I shouldn't have expected any more." She drew herself up as if she wore a noblewoman's finery instead of country clothes, and lifted her chin haughtily. "In that case, accept my apologies for interrupting your drink and my congratulations on a fight well fought."
Keph blinked at the change in her manner and cocked his head. Country wife, scrapper, noble—the woman had more sides than a loaded die. She must have recognized the surprise in his expression because she grimaced and shook her head.
"No," she said, as much to herself as to him it seemed. She looked at him and bent her head. "Thank you," she said with genuine gratitude. "Even if you don't accept it—thank you."
"I..." He searched for words, something that would knock her back down. To his surprise, he couldn't find any. "You're... welcome," he told her haltingly.
She extended her hand. "Feena," she said.
"Keph," he replied, "but then, you already know that." He took her hand and bowed over it politely.
Feena started.
"Keph Thingoleir?"she asked, surprised.
Keph bit down on his tongue, let go of her hand, and said, "My reputation precedes me."
Feena seemed confused. "No," she said, "it's just... this is the second time tonight I've heard your name. And you shake hands like your father."
"I'm sure he'd be pleased to hear that," Keph snapped. He stepped away from her. "You should go."
She looked at him strangely. "I'm sorry if I—"
"Go. And like Noyle said, best not be coming back any time soon."
"All right." Feena's expression hardened. "Will they come after you?"
Keph laid a hand on Quick. No weapons was an unspoken rule inside the Cutter's Dip, but outside was another matter.

"They can try."
"You'll be alone," she warned.
"I was waiting for a friend before you came along. He'll be here soon." He gave Feena a cold glare. "Leave!"
She turned and stalked away—then paused and twisted to look back at him.
"I owe you," she said, then she turned back around and continued on.
"You don't owe me anything!" he shouted after her.
He turned to the railing of the platform and looked out into the darkness of the Stiltways.
Dark, he thought silently. Mistress of the Night, are you the only one who can see me as more than the failed son of Strasus Thingoleir?
He squeezed his eyes closed for a moment, then opened them again. He stood that way for a long while, listening as the sounds of the Cutter's Dip returned to normal at his back. The bleeding light of the tavern caught his shadow and threw it out, long and thin.
Heavy footsteps came creaking along the platform toward him. He twisted around. Jarull stood staring at him.
"What are you doing out here?" the big man asked in surprise.
Keph put on a false smile. "A little trouble," he laughed. "Nothing I couldn't handle." He swaggered up to his friend and punched him in the arm. "You should have been here. You would have enjoyed it!"
Jarull gave him a sober look and said, "Variance wants to see you."
All of Keph's swagger and bravado vanished. He slumped back against a wall.
"Dark, Jarull." He pushed his hands through his hair. "Did she say anything? Is she still angry?"
Three nights past, as he, Talisk, Starne, and Baret had staggered through the depths of the Stiltways celebrating his revenge against Lyraene, Variance had descended on

them like the wrath of Shar herself. For Baret, still trembling after the Selunite's spell, the dark priestess's appearance had been too much. He had shrieked and
dropped where he stood. Talisk and Starne had fled. Keph had found himself backed into a corner as Variance stalked after him, shadows surging as if brought to life by her rage.
"You fool," she had seethed. "You fool! What were you thinking?"
But she hadn't even given him a chance to explain, just pointed a finger at him and hissed, "You will not see me or know Shar's favor again until I send for you!"
His heart had gone cold. All he'd been able to do was stare as she turned and vanished into the shadows. He hadn't seen her—or Bolan—since. He had not been summoned to the Sharran temple. Starne, Talisk, and Baret had taken to shunning him. Even Jarull had seemed distant. And when he tried to work the orison that Variance had taught him at his initiation, there had been nothing. Not after a thousand desperate prayers and hours of sitting in the dark. Shar had not answered him.
If Variance wanted to see him— He looked up at Jarull hopefully. The big man's face twisted.
"Hope is for the ignorant and the weak," he said in disgust. Keph flinched, and Jarull pointed and said, "There's a bookbinder's shop a street along that way and one level up. Go in. Variance is waiting for you."
Keph scrambled to his feet and ran in the direction his friend pointed.
He found the shop easily enough. It was closed for the night, of course. No light showed around the heavy shutters that covered its windows. Keph swallowed and reached for the door handle. The door was unlocked. He pushed it open and stepped inside, closing the door swiftly.
The shop smelled of leather, paper, and glue. Variance stood over a table on which half a dozen books were laid out. A single candle was set on the table as well, though its flame

seemed writhed in shadow, dimming its light to the barest dull glimmer. The light certainly wasn't enough to read by. It came to Keph that Variance didn't need the light. She belonged to Shar. She lived within the
darkness. The candle was there for him, a reminder of his weakness.
"Writing," Variance said without looking up, "is a marvelous thing. Someone can write down a thought they had or a story they heard or a description of something they experienced, and that thought or story or experience is preserved. It will last as long as the writing itself lasts. If the writing is copied, it can last even longer. Through writing, even the humblest man or woman can become, in a way, immortal. Without magic. Without the favor of the gods."
She reached out and turned a page in one of the books.. Keph waited in silence while Variance turned another page, and another. He wanted to fall down on his knees and beg for her forgiveness. He didn't dare. What would another misstep cost him? He waited and the hollow in his heart seemed to grow into an empty, desolate void.
Just when it seemed he had to cry out or go mad, Variance finally looked up.
"And now," she said, "you begin to understand Shar's great sorrow. She may be the Mistress of the Night, but she is also the Lady of Loss. When Selune kindled fire in the darkness of creation, she did so without thought for her sister. Ever since that first dawn, Shar has ached for the simple peace that Selune tore from her." Variance stepped away from the table. "Do you understand, Keph?"
He nodded. He could feel tears on his cheeks. Variance studied him. When she spoke, her voice was soft.
"What were you thinking when you attacked that half-elf?"
"I wanted to hurt her," Keph said. The words burst out of him. "I wanted to hurt her the way she hurt me. She mocked me with what I didn't have, so I wanted to take it away from her." He wiped at his face with the heel of his palm. "I

wanted to honor Shar with Lyraene's loss!"
"Ah."
Variance turned and began to close the books on the table. Keph clenched his jaw.
"I'm sorry, Variance!" he blurted. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to—"
She turned on hini sharply.
"Now," she hissed, "you dishonor Shar! The agony of an enemy's spirit, that is joy to the Mistress of the Night. Regret —" She slammed the cover of the final book. "Regret is no honor. Especially false regret." She glared at him. "Everything that you did to Lyraene, you did deliberately."
Keph stumbled back. "No..." he gasped. Variance raised her eyebrows. Keph's hands curled into fists. "I mean, yes. Yes, everything was deliberate. But I didn't mean to dishonor Shar!" He sank down to his knees. "Please, Variance. Forgive me!"
Variance's pale face was cold. "Shar does not forgive."
Keph felt his heart drop out of his chest.
"But," added Variance, "she does teach." She reached down and offered Keph her hand. He took it and rose. "If you wish to truly honor Shar, Keph, you must be patient. The Selunites would erase us from Faerun, just as Selune tried to erase her sister's darkness. Think ... if you had been patient, if you had taken Lyraene somewhere else...."
"The priest of Selune wouldn't have found us," Keph said. He clenched his teeth and looked at Variance. "But he did find us. Variance, the Selunites—"
The priestess silenced him with a gesture and said, "The Selunites don't recognize Shar's hand in what you tried to do."
"But Lyraene or her friends must have told someone what happened," Keph protested. Variance tilted her head.
"Is this the first you've thought of that possibility?" she asked.
Keph blinked, and flushed. Not one guard had so much as

come calling on Fourstaves House since his attack on Lyraene. He'd been so terrified by Variance's rage that the fact hadn't crossed his mind.
"Yes," he admitted in a whisper.
"And how would you have dealt with her accusations if you had carried out your revenge to its fullest extent?"
He swallowed and said, "I didn't think of it."
Variance slapped him across the face.
"Shar favors you more than anyone could have guessed!" she cursed. Keph hung his head. Variance forced his chin up.
"I have visited Lyraene," she said. "Shar grants me certain powers over the minds of the weak. Lyraene recalls the duel and her injury, but not your malice. She bears anger for you, but not outrage. You're fortunate I was able to reach her in time."
Keph stared into the priestess's cold eyes, then glanced away.
"Thank you, Variance," he said.
"Patience and subtly, Keph," she said, and she finally released him. "Bolan doesn't believe you have the potential to become a priest."
Keph bristled at the comment. "I—"
"Hush." Variance silenced him again. "I don't share Bolan's opinions. Shar has great plans for you, Keph. I'm certain of it. Perhaps they will be revealed soon. Until then, you need to bide your time. Let the spirit inside you burn, but give no one cause to guess your true allegiance. Shar's worship prospers in secret—this is the Dark Goddess's lesson. Do you understand?"
He nodded. She touched her fingers to his forehead in silence, then stepped back.
"You have seen me again. Know Shar's favor once more."
It felt like a yoke had been lifted form his shoulders. Keph gasped in joy.
"Hail to the Mistress of the Night!" he sighed.
Variance gave him a cool smile and folded her hands.

"Go," she said. "I told Jarull to await your return."
Keph bowed low before her and turned, walking through the door and back out into the Stiltways. His heart felt as light as it had after his initiation, but without the sense of invulnerability that had led him astray. A mistaken invulnerability! He breathed a sigh
of relief for the second time that night.
Jarull was leaning back in a shadow just where Keph had left him. He started upright as Keph approached— and his somber expression was shattered by a grin as he saw Keph's face.
"She forgave you!" he whooped.
"She taught me," Keph said, but he returned Jarull's grin and swung an arm around his shoulder. "Let's see if we can find Starne and the others." He looked along the platform toward the Cutter's Dip. "I feel like tonight is just getting started."

## CHAPTER 9

Drinking. Singing. Stumbling from tavern to tavern to tavern by night, then by day, then by night again. A fight. Another fight. Just like old times; Jarull by his side. Better because Starne, Baret, and Talisk were there as well.
And better because of the dark secret in his heart: Shar's favor. The Mistress of the Night's plans for him.
Variance had told him to let his spirit burn. Keph let it rage like an inferno until it seemed as if every tavern in the Stiltways—and some beyond—knew his name and face. Until even Baret, Starne, and Talisk had, one by one, dropped away, unable to keep up. Until it was just him and Jarull striding the nights once again.
"All right, tosspots, up. Up! Time to go home!"
A guard ran a stick along the bars of the cell while another unlocked the door and swung it wide.
Keph opened sticky eyes to the harmony of squealing hinges and groaning drunks. He sat up on the rough wooden bench he'd managed to claim and looked around at the disorderly cell in Yhaunn's north side guard station—a fine place to

spend the night. He hauled himself to his feet and joined the other men and women the city guard had brought in during the night before as they filed out the door, then formed a queue to retrieve any possessions they had been arrested with.

There was no sign of Jarull. A hazy memory swam into Keph's mind: a dash away from the pursuing guard, an ignoble tumble as his foot landed in something wet and slippery, Jarull continuing on and vanishing into the shadows. Lucky Jarull.

The guard at the desk raised her eyebrows as he stepped up. "Good morning again, Keph. Sleep well?" she asked.

"I think a rat crawled into my mouth while I slept, Fris. You should do something about the pests around here."

"Well, we shove them out the door every morning, but it seems like more just crawl in every night." She pushed Quick and a coin pouch across the desk to him. "Twice in three days you've landed here. Let's try to get it back down to once a month like old times, eh?"

"Your concern is noted, Fris."

Keph wiggled his fingers into his pouch. It was a flat and shriveled thing, wasted away by the past few days' activities. He found a couple of silver coins, though, and slid them back to the guard. She made them disappear as the next inmate stepped up. Keph buckled Quick back around his waist and headed for the guard station's big door.

The light of early morning hit him like a god's vengeance. He groaned and threw up a hand to shade his eyes. The air was already uncomfortably warm. It was going
to be a very hot day. With luck he would be able to sleep through most of it.

It was a long, painful stagger to Fourstaves House. His head throbbed, his joints ached, and his mouth felt as if it had been stuffed with wool combed from a sheep's backside. At a public well, he stopped, drew up a bucket of water, and tried to rinse the foul taste from his mouth. The rest of the

water he poured over his head until he was gasping from the cold. His hair was still dripping when he reached the doors of Fourstaves House, but at least the pain in his head had ebbed and faded.
The stone guard dogs were still as statues by daylight. Keph resisted the urge to kick them anyway and went inside. The entry hall was filled with savory odors that cut through his hangover to make his stomach growl with desire. Following his nose, he stumbled for the dining room.
Strasus, Dagnalla, Malia, Roderio, and Krin Foxrun were all seated at one end of the table. They fell silent as he walked in. He ignored them and walked straight for the covered trays and dishes set out on a sideboard. Conversation returned slowly.
"I think I've found a clue in the coins of the cache," Krin said. "The other artifacts may be ancient Netherese, but most of the coins are more recent and come from one of Netheril's survivor states, Anauria. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to find enough information about Anaurian rulers to date the coins accurately, but we do know Anauria fell to ores in the Year of Fallen Guards, 111 DR. No more Anaurian coins were minted after that. Of course, the coins could have been collected after the country's fall, but with so many in one place I would guess that it's more like they came directly from Anauria."
"Good, good," nodded Strasus. "So we have an end date, then." He stroked his beard. "And more than two hundred years before the founding of Selgaunt and Saerloon. What about-?"
"—a possible beginning date?" Krin sounded pleased with himself. Keph rolled his eyes in boredom as he
began lifting covers and heaping a plate with grilled bread, olives, spiced chicken livers, and boiled eggs. He mouthed nonsense words along with Krin as his brother-in-law answered Strasus. "Among the coins was a sealed pouch containing fifty new gold coins from Calimshan celebrating

the ascension of Qysar Shoon III of the Shoon Imperium, an event that occurred in 107 DR, the Year of the Fledglings. The striking on the coins was still sharp. They hadn't been circulated. I think they became part of the cache soon after their minting."
Strasus was stroking his beard so quickly Keph was surprised the whiskers weren't falling out.
"Well done, Krin," the old man said.
"Calishite coins among artifacts from Netheril and a Netherese survivor-state," commented Dagnalla. "That's an odd combination. I didn't think the two civilizations had much to do with each other."
Strasus sighed and shook his head. "I'm certain the tiles from the cache would tell us more, if only I could translate the writing on them. They resist even magical translation." His fingers slowed. "A picture begins to emerge, however. On the eve of Anauria's fall, artifacts of Netherese heritage are smuggled out of the doomed nation. Those escorting the artifacts make for Calimshan—some ally there has sent them Calishite coin. They travel east from their doomed nation and south, skirting the settlements growing in the Dale-lands, and head for the docks at a rough quarrying community, perhaps to seek passage across the Sea of Fallen Stars and south..."
"But why abandon their treasures?" Dagnalla asked. "And why avoid the Dalelands?"
"If they were traveling in secret, they might have wanted to avoid anyone who could seize their treasures," suggested Roderio. "And when they had to meet with other people in Yhaunn, maybe they hid their treasures with the intention of retrieving them later, but were unable to go back."
"Possibly. But why were they going to Calimshan?"
Keph dragged a chair away from the table with a loud, penetrating scrape.
"Most importantly," Keph said, "why bother asking?"
He set his laden plate down and dropped into the chair with

a satisfied groan. Malia gave him a look of disgust.
"Some people want to know things, Keph," she said. "Things other than what the inside of a jail cell looks like and how much ale they can drink before they throw up."
"Knowledge for knowledge's sake, then?" Keph asked. He impaled a liver on his fork and gestured with it. Spice-stained sauce splattered across the table. "Nothing purely practical, like unlocking the secret of some forgotten Netherese magic, for instance?"
Strasus looked at him with a long face. "Wouldn't that be a good thing to know?" he asked.
His voice was slow with the infuriating patience of an adult talking to a child. Keph's lips curled. He popped the liver in his mouth, and talked around it as he chewed. "How much ale you can drink before you throw up is a good thing to know, too."
Roderio flushed, blood showing bright red through the pale translucency of his newly healed skin. "Charming as ever, aren't you, Keph?"
"I have to keep up with you, Rodo."
His brother's face looked ready to bleed. Keph held back a satisfied smirk as he tucked into his breakfast. He glanced up at his family. Malia, Krin, and Roderio were staring at him. Strasus and Dagnalla were looking at each other, their old hands clasped.
"Go on," Keph mumbled around a mouthful of food. "Keep talking. It sounded really interesting. Hmpk—no, that's not right..." He swallowed. "I'm sorry, I meant to say it sounded really dull."
Roderio flung his napkin onto the table. "No," he said, "I think we're finished. I have research to work on."
"New potions?" Keph asked.
Roderio shot him a burning glare and turned away sharply to stride out of the room. Krin and Malia glanced
at each other, then rose as well. They left without saying anything. Keph looked at his father and mother. "Well?" he

asked.
Emotion flickered across Dagnalla's face. "Keph," she said, her voice and eyes weary, "you look terrible."
"I've been working on my own research, mother. Comparing the insides of jail cells."
Dagnalla closed her eyes for a moment.
Strasus leaned forward, admonishing, "Keph..."
Keph paused in his eating to ask, "Are you going to lecture me now?"
"No."
"Good."
He went back to eating.
"Keph," Strasus said with a sigh, "Hane Cartcoster came to see us yesterday evening. She's still looking for Jarull. She'd heard that he's been seen around Yhaunn with you, but he hasn't been home for more than two ten-days now. Do you know where he is?"
"No," Keph answered, and for the moment at least, it was the truth.
"Hane is worried about him."
"Hane is always worried about Jarull."
"I know," agreed Strasus, "but this time she's really worried, and I think for good cause. She asked us to try locating him with magic. We couldn't find him."
The food in Keph's mouth turned dry and bitter as ashes. He choked it down and looked up slowly.
"If you ever" he spat, "tried doing that to me, I would never forgive you. Never!'
"Keph, are you listening to us?" said Dagnalla. "We couldn't find Jarull. If you have seen him, then—"
"I heard you." Keph dropped his fork onto his plate. The ring Variance had given his friend, he guessed immediately—it must have carried some kind of protection against divination magic. He glared at his parents. "Did you hear me? I don't want you casting your magic on me like that."
"You wouldn't want us to look for you if we thought

you were in danger?" Strasus asked. He took Dagnalla's hand again, and his mouth went hard. "No, Keph. I'm not going to promise you that. We're not going to promise you that."
Keph clenched his teeth and grumbled, "Because you think I need your help? Because you don't think I can take care of myself?"
"No!" Strasus exclaimed.
"Magic didn't protect Roderio, did it?"
Keph shoved his chair back and stood up. The words of the orison that Variance had taught him rose to his lips. The smallest, most insignificant of spells—but it would show Strasus wouldn't it? Show him that while he might not see the potential in his youngest son, Shar did.
Except that Variance had told him not to reveal his faith to anyone.
For a moment, Keph struggled between his anger and the dark priestess's warning. One orison. Just one—
He swallowed the prayer and glared at his parents. "Is magic the only thing anyone in this family cares about?"
He turned and stalked out of the dining room and back to the entrance hall. His hangover had returned with a vengeance, and breakfast wasn't sitting well.
He'd just started climbing the big main stair when a shout rippled down from above: "Hey, Uncle Keph!"
Keph looked up.
Adrey stood at the head of the stairs, dressed against the heat in a simple white dress.
Just as she had looked laid out on Shar's altar.
His foot missed the next step and he stumbled, almost falling before catching himself on the banister. Adrey came leaping down the stairs to meet him.
"Are you all right?" she asked.
"I'm fine, Adrey. Thanks."
There was sweat on his forehead. Keph wiped it away with a trembling hand. No, he reminded himself, it hadn't been

Adrey on the altar but an illusion. Just an illusion.
An illusion that he shoved a knife through.
Adrey's forehead creased. "You don't look fine." Her nose wrinkled. "Beshaba's ivory arms, you stink!"
"Adrey!" He gulped back the nausea that churned in his stomach. "Language!"
"I'm not Adrey today," she replied. "Guess who I am."
The girl jumped back and waved a stick at him. He squinted at it.
"That's not one of your father's wands, is it?"
"It's not a wand." She lunged forward and poked at him.
Keph reacted instinctively, turning so that the blow slid past him, then stepping clear and reaching for Quick's hilt. Adrey spun around to face him.
"You have Tymora's own luck," she crowed, "but I'll change that!"
She flicked the stick menacingly back and forth through the air like a rapier.
Dark, gasped Keph in silent shock, then said, "Adrey, what are you doing?"
"What?" Adrey looked down at her feet. "Am I standing wrong?"
Keph's hand was still on Quick's hilt. He forced it away and said, "You should be practicing your magic. If you don't practice, you won't become a wizard. You don't want that."
He stretched out his hand to take the stick, but she twitched it out of reach and made a face.
"Everyone around here is a wizard," she whined. "I don't want to do that anymore. I want to learn to fight like you do!"
Keph clenched his teeth and said, "No, you don't."
She looked puzzled.
"I've watched you practicing," Adrey replied. "It looks more fun than learning cantrips."
"Well, I think cantrips are more interesting."
Adrey made another face and said, "Well, they aren't.

There's only one way to do them and if you don't get it right, they don't work." She swiped her stick through the air again. "Come on, Uncle Keph! Show me something."
Sweat trickled cold over Keph's flushed face. His head throbbed.
"Maybe later, Adrey," Keph said. "I... need to go to my room."
He turned away back up the stairs. Adrey looked disappointed, but stepped out of his way.
"Do you want me to tell Gran that you're not feeling good?" she called.
"No, thank you."
"All right." Keph heard her start to trot on down the stairs. "I hope you're feeling better soon. I love you, Uncle Keph!"
Keph twisted around to look at her, but she was already bounding across the entry hall, maybe looking for her grandparents in the dining room.
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"I've heard back from the various followers of Selune who help us keep watch for Sharran activity around Yhaunn," Julith said.
Feena glanced at her as they paced through the corridors of Moonshadow Hall. "And?" she asked.
"Nothing—not around the Stiltways, not anywhere. If there are Sharrans in the city, they're keeping very, very quiet."
Feena gave the younger priestess a faint smile and said, "I notice that you're not ruling out their presence all together."
"You saw what you saw," Julith said, "and caution never hurts." She returned Feena's glance. "I discovered something else, though. After your encounter, Mifano never even bothered to check with the watchers."
Feena pressed her lips together. "Too sure of his own assessment of the situation, I suspect. Did the watchers have anything to say about..." She grimaced. "Anything else?"
"The Stiltways are humming with stories of werewolves," Julith replied. "The tales have spread a little bit

into the city at large, but seem to be mostly dismissed as drunken ravings. No one except High Luck Shoondeep seems to have made any connection to you, though."
"I hope it stays that way," Feena said bitterly.
After her experience at the Cutter's Dip three nights before, she had hastened back to Moonshadow Hall, sticking to Yhaunn's more brightly lit streets. A quick leap over the kitchen wall had brought her back to safety once more—but it hadn't been until she'd collapsed into a chair in Julith's room that the harrowing danger had really hit her. She'd tracked the servants of Malar in Arch Wood, even fought vampires in Selgaunt, but a mob of unarmed drunks had almost brought her down. Feena had given fervent thanks to Selune for her deliverance—even if it had been at the arrogant hands of Keph Thingoleir—and paid serious attention to Julith when she suggested that maybe another approach was needed.
Even if that approach failed to yield results, it was better than risking her furry skin chasing Sharrans that might or might not exist. Besides, with Julith to support her, there was more than enough to keep her busy around Moonshadow Hall.
They approached a door that opened onto the cloisters.
"Ready?" asked Julith.
Feena smoothed the simple pale blue gown that the seamstress had prepared for her and checked the silver web in her hair.
"Ready," she said.
Julith pulled open the door. Feena walked through, passed across the shaded walkway, and stepped out into the golden light of afternoon that flooded the courtyard.
Around Selune's sacred pool, a group of about a dozen people were gathered: representatives of the city's merchants, craft guilds, the Nessarch's office, and the high priests and priestesses of the council of temples—even Colle Shoondeep. Velsinore and Mifano were there as well, Mifano

making restrained conversation with various people while Velsinore kept a critical eye on the acolytes who moved among the group, offering chilled wine.

"Thank you all for coming," Feena called.

Conversation stilled and faces turned toward her as she walked across the grass. The acolytes made a silent, graceful exit, except for one who quickly brought wine to Feena and Julith before departing. Feena inclined her head to her guests. They returned the gesture—some more enthusiastically and graciously than others. Colle barely nodded. Mifano's bow was deep but cold and stiff. Velsinore didn't move at all.

Feena ignored the three of them.

"As some of you may know," she said, pronouncing each word as clearly as she had practiced with Julith, "it has become a tradition at Moonshadow Hall to open our doors to the poor of Yhaunn on the night of the new moon in what we call the New Moon Beneficence."

"And a wonderful tradition it is, too!" said Endress Halatar.

Feena nodded in acknowledgement of her praise and said, "It is always popular, and it has won Moonshadow Hall much favor in the less wealthy parts of the city. The New Moon Beneficence was never intended to bring worshipers to Selune, however, only to provide some relief to the poor. We can't help all of them, though. Each new moon, we find ourselves turning people away. That's why I would like to invite you all—other temples, the city, merchants, and guilds—to share in this act of charity. All of us are wealthy. If we work together one night a month; we would be able to provide for many, many people."

The group reacted in startled silence, glancing among themselves, some with an expression of immediate skepticism, some with cautious interest. Velsinore and Mifano, of course, looked ready to spit fire, but they didn't dare say anything—challenging their Moonmistress-Designate in front of outsiders would only highlight the

division within Moonshadow Hall.. Feena held her breath. The reaction was exactly what Julith had predicted, and if only the guests would react in accordance with the rest of the young priestess's expectations—

Colle rose to the occasion. "Preposterous!" he blustered. "The poor will certainly benefit, but once word came out that this was all Moonshadow Hall's idea, how would that make the rest of us look?"

Feena let out her breath. "As you yourself said in our last council, Colle, it's a great shame when temple competes with temple. If the announcement is phrased properly, all Yhauntans will see is the group of us working together for the common good. It will benefit all of us—" she nodded to the representatives of the city's civil authorities—"Temples, merchants, and guilds."

Colle blinked, his bluster countered, and Feena turned to Endress. Julith had suggested that the old priestess would be the most likely to support the idea. Feena was relieved to see interest sparkling in her eyes.

"High Mistress of Revels?" she asked. "What do you think?"

"You know I love any excuse for a party." Endress chuckled. "Especially one for a good cause." She tilted her head. "But there would be a tremendous amount of organization involved."

"With your help, I don't think it would be difficult." She looked to the high priest of Ilmater, the suffering god who was traditionally the patron of the impoverished. "Sir?" she asked humbly.

He nodded slowly and said, "A burden shared is a burden more easily borne. You have Ilmater's blessing."

"And Deneir's," added the High Scrivener of the Lord of All Glyphs. Feena held back a grin. Julith had said that the two priests, the most conservative members of the council of temples, would agree with each other. Another prediction fulfilled!

"And Waukeen's, as well, Moonmistress." The priest of the

goddess of wealth bowed toward Feena. "Generosity is the root of success."
Feena heard Julith let out a little gasp beside her. Waukeen's priest had been among those the priestess had judged would be the most difficult to convince. That he had come around so quickly was almost a miracle! Feena
bowed back to him, honoring him with a deeper bow than he had given her.
"Thank you," she replied.
The representatives of the Nessarch, the council of merchants, and the craft guilds were still communicating among themselves with whispers and skeptical glances. The merchants' representative finally looked up and cleared his throat.
"The idea seems to have merit," he said, caution plain in his tone, "but none of us can offer our full approval without consulting our members. And with the new moon only tomorrow night, we couldn't organize meetings in time to give you an answer."
"Of course," said Feena. She couldn't hold back her smile anymore and it spread across her face just as the warmth of triumph spread through her belly. "I didn't expect that you could. That's why I would like to invite you to attend—"
"Feena!"
From the window of her sitting room, Dhauna Myri-tar's voice drifted down into the courtyard, piercing and demanding. It didn't sound like the High Moonmistress was frightened or in pain, however. Feena clenched her teeth behind her smile and carried on.
"I would like to invite all of you," she said, extending her arms to encompass the group, "to attend tomorrow's New Moon Beneficence as my guests. I think you will see-"
Dhauna's second call was more strident: "Feena!"
Feena winced and glanced at Julith. The other priestess gave her a sharp nod of encouragement. Feena drew a breath. "I think you'll see how much need there is for this type of

cooperation and how much good we would be able to do if we were to work togeth—"
Feena!
The call was magical, echoing inside her head as loudly as if Dhauna were standing right next to her and shouting in her ear. Feena gasped and actually staggered. Julith caught her.
"Feena, what is it?" the young priestess whispered.
"Mother Dhauna doesn't want to be ignored," Feena grunted. She stood and offered her guests a bow. "Please excuse me," she said. "It seems there's something I must see to." She laid a hand on Julith's shoulder. "Julith can tell you anything you need to know. Thank you very much for taking the time to come and speak with me."
She turned—and Mifano and Velsinore turned as well, moving to intercept her as the rest of the group converged on Julith. She shot the pair a hard glance.
"Not now," she snapped.
"Feena—!" Velsinore began angrily.
Feena glared at her. "I said not now!"
She crossed the courtyard at a swift stride. As soon as she was beyond the cloisters and inside the temple, she broke into a furious run, hastening up to the High Moonmistress's quarters before Dhauna could try calling her again.
The high priestess stood at the door, waiting for her.
"Do you ever intend to come when I call you?" the old woman asked.
"I was busy, Mother Dhauna," Feena snarled. "Did you look out your window? I was in the courtyard meeting with people. Important people!" She stormed past Dhauna and into the sitting room. It was dark. The High Moonmistress had drawn the curtains against the sun. Magic lit the desk in a puddle of light. Dhauna closed the door and waddled over to the desk.
Feena looked at her and frowned. "Where are your canes?"
"I put them aside," said Dhauna. "Selune gives me strength." She'd used magic to bolster herself, just as she had on the

night of the Full Moon Blessing. Feena's eyes narrowed.
"What's going on, Dhauna? Why did you call me?" "I've unlocked the meaning of the dreams." Feena stared at her in surprise for a moment, then asked, "What?"
Dhauna scowled and said, "Are you deaf? Is that why you don't come when you're called?" She shoved her chair out of the way and bent over a series of books and scrolls laid out on the desk. "I said I've unlocked the meaning of the dreams. I know what Selune has been trying to guide me toward."
There was only the barest trace of triumph in her voice and no joy at all. Feena hesitated before asking, "You've uncovered the heresy?"
"Yes and no," Dhauna replied, gesturing. "Come look at this."
Feena stepped over to the desk and looked down at the collection of records laid out there. Dhauna pointed at the first of them, a book of dark, greasy parchment. The ink on the pages had bled badly over time, but the book was clearly written in the angular Dethek script used in the region of the Moonsea.
"This is a record of inquests held at the House of the Moon in the city of Thentia," said Dhauna. "It came to Moonshadow Hall about a hundred years ago, but parts of the record are as much as two centuries older. This was written in about 1194." She cleared her throat and read, "'Mirela, Fela, and Iwna Telsk, the three sisters who tended Selune's shrine at the trade moot of Glister until the Year of Sinking Sails, stand accused of the New Moon Heresy. As the sisters perished in that year, we declare that none may judge them save Selune herself and in memory of their long years of true faith, declare them acquitted of these false and heinous charges.'"
Feena frowned again. "I've never heard of the New Moon Heresy."
"Neither had I," admitted Dhauna. "I wonder if the Thentians had either. The Year of Sinking Sails was U.80 Dalereckoning.

It's almost as if it took them fourteen years just to assign a name to whatever those three priestesses did. And Glister is only a remote crossroads even father north than Thentia. To have crossed that distance and endured so many years of investigation, the rumor must have been something shocking." She
put her finger on the eptry. "But as soon as I found this entry, I knew it was what I was looking for. Then I found this..."
She moved her finger to a scroll of cracked parchment that was being held flat by a shoe on one side and the moon's road tiara on the other. The scroll had been written in the bold curves of Thorass that Feena could read herself. "'And long be chanted the name of Marrigan, who heard the call of Selune and turned her back on the Gray Wolves to become a hero of the New Moon,'" she read out loud. She looked at Dhauna. "Wait. Here it sounds like the New Moon Heresy is something highly regarded."
"This scroll is a transcription of legends told by the more civilized of the Uthgardt tribes of the Silver Marches in the northwest beyond the Anauroch desert," said Dhauna. "The scroll is centuries old, but the stories are probably even older."
Feena's eyebrows rose. "I've heard of the Gray Wolf Uthgardt tribe," she gasped. "They're werewolves!"
Dhauna nodded and said, "And savages by all accounts, so a Gray Wolf following the call of Selune must have been something. Unfortunately, that's all the scroll has to say about Marrigan. Two clues about the New Moon Heresy, yet still nothing clear. But then..."
She reached for a folded leaf of fine vellum and carefully opened it.
The vellum had been used to take a rubbing of some stone inscription. The carved words were in both Dethek and Thorass, in two columns of characters. Feena took the vellum gently and held it up to read the ghostly words.

To the memory o/Niree Swifthands. In Elmwood, a Hero of the New Moon Pact, in Chancelgaunt, a Heretic. Murdered in treachery and jealousy there at Bright Lady's Tower in the Year of Lost Wayfarers, 757. Selune guide her to rest.
"Chancelgaunt is the old name for Selgaunt," said Dhauna. "The rubbing was taken in the Temple of the
Half-Moon in Elmwood, an ancient village on the south side of the Moonsea."
"I've been there," said Feena. "I don't remember seeing this memorial."
"It may well be gone or by hidden now—the rubbing was made almost four hundred years ago, two hundred years after this Niree Swifthands was executed at Selune's temple in Selgaunt."
"There's no temple to Selune in Selgaunt."
"There was six hundred years ago. Ironically, it was abandoned and demolished not long after 757. Its library was brought here." Dhauna opened the final book on the table, a grand tome bound in silver and white leather. "Eighteen Kythorn, the Year of Lost Wayfarers," she began.
Feena moved around to read over her shoulder.
I, Brima Chintamn, High Moonmistress of Bright Lady's Tower in Chancelgaunt, declare the ancient Pact of the New Moon to be ended. The lands and goods held by it and its former members are forfeit and are to become the property of the temple of Selune to which they lie nearest. Its tales and legends are declared false and are to be purged from archives and expunged from memory. Its members are declared heretics. Those in our custody have been tried and found guilty—they are cast out ofSelUne's grace, in body and in soul. Should any remain free, let them also be cast out of Selune's grace. Their heresy has damned them. I pray that Selune's face turn away so that their souls walk in darkness until the end of time.
I, Rian Liurandel, Priestess of the High Moonlight of the House of the Moon in Waterdeep, concur and so pray.

I, Zarran Tonnos, High Moonmistress of Moonmaiden's Hall in Murran, concur and so pray.
I, Bero Falabara, High Moonmaster of the Crescent Shrine in Alaghdn, concur and so pray.
I, Mara Nightnever, High Moonmistress of Moonshadow Hall in Yhaunn, concur and so pray.
The list went on, another half dozen high priests and priestesses—though not the high priestess of Elmwood—adding their condemnation.
"Moonmaiden's grace," breathed Feena. "What was this Pact of the New Moon and what did they do?"
Dhauna began flipping back through the book as she explained, "According to the records of their trial, the New Moon Pact was an order of priests and warriors in Selune's service throughout the north and west of Faerun. They were never large, but they were ancient—this makes passing mention of events centuries before the trial, which would fit with the Uthgardt legend of Marrigan. And even though they were a small order, over time the Pact accumulated significant wealth and power while answering to no temple or clerical hierarchy."
"The New Moon Pact is a strange name for a Selunite order," Feena observed. "The new moon is a dark time."
Dhauna looked up at her. "The New Moon Pact," she said in a quiet voice, "did dark deeds. They claimed to serve the interests of Selune that couldn't be spoken openly."
Feena's eyes went wide. "Assassins?"she choked.
"They were never accused of that," Dhauna said. "They were defenders and avengers, working in secret and sometimes against the interests of the larger temples. Six hundred years later, the charges of heresy ring more than hollow." She flipped back to the declaration of condemnation. "This passage about land and goods being forfeit to the temples—I've seen that in too many trumped up charges of outlawry. I think Selune's clergy feared and envied the New Moon Pact."
"Because they were fighters?" Feena snorted. "I think I like

these people."
"They were more than just fighters, Feena." Dhauna gave her a sideways glance. "The New Moon Pact embraced werewolves and lycanthropes of all kinds."
Feena opened her mouth in amazement, then closed it again, speechless.
"An order of werewolves?" she whispered finally. "They still exist then. I've heard stories of the Sil—"
"Silverstars?" Dhauna finished for her. She shook her head. "The Silverstars accept lycanthropes, but they aren't the same. Silverstars promote tolerance and harmony in Selune's name." She touched the declaration of condemnation. "The Pact fought for Selune. They moved in darkness. Maybe that's what gave their persecutors the basis for the accusation of heresy."
"Which was?" asked Feena.
Dhauna flipped through the book once more and indicated another passage. Feena bent closer and read:
... and over time they became corrupted by the darkness they had been commanded to fight, turning from Selune's light to chant and pray in unholy tongues to Shar. Worse, they then affirmed a blasphemy: that Shar was not Selune's sister, but the Moonmaiden herself, and that Shar was only a name given to Selune's dark face.
Feena gasped and flinched back. Her hand darted up to clutch the battered disk of her holy symbol. "That's monstrous!"
"And so the ancient New Moon Pact became the reviled New Moon Heresy, its members damned and the very mention of it erased. The pact survives only in remote inscriptions and barbarian tales, the mere mention of the heresy only in charges that take more than a decade to even identify." Dhauna closed the great tome and said, " Our Silver Lady shield us from such horrors."
Feena swallowed and said, "But if the priestesses of Glister could even be accused of such a thing____" She

looked up. "Dhauna, could the New Moon Heresy have been reborn here? Is that what Selune is trying to warn you about?"
"No," said Dhauna, a gentleness returning to her voice. "There's no truth to the Heresy. It was a false accusation-terrible, but false. The priestesses of Glister were caught by a shadow of a memory of it. And whispers of the Heresy in my dreams..." The High Moonmistress patted Feena's cheek. "A clue, nothing more. One I misinterpreted in my
weakness. Heresy is a danger, but knowledge of the New Moon Heresy was necessary only to uncover the truth of the Pact."
"Then why did Selune send the dreams at all?" Feena asked in confusion. "What does she want?"
Dhauna's gentle smile hardened. "She wants me to bring back the New Moon Pact. That's clear to me now. She wants me to lead the fight against her enemies outside of the temples—and within it. My summoning of you, that was part of her plan, too."
Feena stared at her. "What?"
"Only lycanthropes could belong to the New Moon Pact." Dhauna Myritar reached up and wrenched with magic-enhanced strength at the neck of her robe, tearing it wide to expose her chest. "Bite me, Feena! Turn me into a werewolf!"
peena stared at the High Moonmistress in shock.
"No!" she spat. "Dhauna, that's-"
"Insane?" Dhauna's eyes were bright and her cheeks flushed, but her voice was steady. "That's what you all think of me already, isn't it? My ears are still sharp, Feena, and in spite of what everyone seems to think, so are my wits. There are things to be seen by moonlight that sunlight cannot reveal." She moved closer, holding her torn robe wide. "Bite me!" she ordered. "You were the one my thoughts turned to the night of that first dream. Selune knew I would need you here to share her blessing with me! With it, I will be stronger, more vital—the Moonmaiden's arm!"

"Dhauna, no," Feena said. She backed away from the old priestess. "Being, a werewolf isn't a blessing. Do you know what would happen if I were to bite you?"
"I wouldn't ask if I didn't." Dhauna lowered
her hands from her collar and said, "On the night of next full moon, I will take the form of a wolf, with no more than an animal's wild instincts. I saw it happen to you as a girl. We had to lock you in one of the chambers in the infirmary until the night was over. But you learned to control it, didn't you?"
Feena gasped. "I learned to control it, yes, but I was born a werewolf. The wolf has always been inside me. In you..." She spread her hands. "Mother Dhauna, the beast would rage out of control. Believe me. I've seen it happen all too often."
"Control can be taught."
"I—" Feena ground her teeth together, cutting off her own words. "No. I won't do it."
Dhauna hissed, "You have to." Her voice rose and broke. "You have to! Selune has guided us both to this moment."
"I won't!" Feena shouted.
Her refusal echoed in the sudden silence. Dhauna stared at her with hard, cold eyes. After a moment, she said softly, "I see."
"Mother Dhauna..." Feena began.
The high priestess just shook her head. "I feared this," she said. "You reject Our Silver Lady's call. I'm sorry, Feena." Her arm rose, fingers curled into a mystic sign. "By the Moonmaiden's light, let your hidden spirit be revealed!"
Silver light lanced out as if the full moon itself were captured in Dhauna's curled fingers. Feena gasped—then shrieked. The sound of her dress ripping apart vanished in the pain that washed over her. Fur raced across her skin, burning like fire. Her joints and bones popped and rearranged themselves. Muscles1 shifted and broke. Her face tore as it grew into a muzzle. The forced change was harsher than anything she had ever endured. When her paws hit the

floor, it was all she could do to stay on them.
"The New Moon Pact," snarled Dhauna, "will be reborn!"
The night above the terrace of the Sky's Mantle was black and featureless. No moon. No stars. It draped down to shroud Yhaunn in darkness, wrapping it in thick, still heat. The terrace was the only source of light and noise.
Keph sat at a long table, the center of attention. Jarull, Starne, Baret, and Talisk sat with him, all of them laughing, all of them drinking the wine that flowed freely from a pitcher in the middle of the table. Strangely, Variance was there as well, laughing and drinking right along with them. Even stranger, so was Bolan. The priest's weird, flawless face didn't move, even when he laughed.
And they were all laughing a lot at the stories Keph told. At least Keph thought they were stories. He couldn't actually hear himself. Whenever he spoke, the words just came out as an indistinct buzz, something like a fly in a hot room. Whatever he was saying, though, it was clever and funny. Confidence rolled through him and he wished he could hear the story himself. It must have been good, maybe the best tale ever told. Everyone was hanging on his words.
Not just his friends, either. When he turned his head to the side, he realized that the table was a lot longer than he'd thought. It stretched out like a banquet table. Crowded around it were all of Shar's cultists, some hooded, some boldly barefaced. There were other people, too. The denizens of the Cutter's Dip: Stag, Drik, Noyle, Lahumbra, Kor, and other men and women he couldn't name. He focused on a knot of them as they fawned over him.
I know you, he thought, but from where?
They were Lyraene's friends—the cronies who backed her in the fight on the bridge.
"That's right, you bastard!" the half-elf shrieked. She leaned over the table, her face damp with sweat, her blond hair limp around her delicately tapered ears. "They're yours now. You wanted them, you got 'em. They didn't want to be

around me anymore."
She thrust her right arm in front of his face. What shriveled flesh clung to her bones was red and oozing, flaked with tattered patches of black crust. Her hand and wrist were twisted, muscles and tendons drawn taut by Quick's lightning. Keph's stomach rose at the sight and he lurched back.
"You're not going to take that, are you?" asked Jarull.
Keph spun to look at his friend. Jarull sat close to Variance—very close. Their hands were entwined, the matching amethyst rings nestled together and winking at each other in the light. The purple gleam reflected in Jarull's eyes.
"Believe in the Lady of Loss," said Variance. "Your faith is strong, isn't it?"
Keph turned back to Lyraene and raised his hand. Shar's disk dangled from his fingers to lie like an eye in the center of his palm. Lyraene sneered at him and reached out with her burned hand.
"Shar take you!" Keph snarled.
Shadows welled up like smoke, billowing silently over the half-elf. Between one heartbeat and the next, she was gone.
Ecstasy blossomed in Keph as night's power swept through his soul. Drunk on it, he whirled and raised his hand to Lyraene's former friends.
"Shar take you!"
Darkness swallowed them as well. Their laughter disappeared. Keph spun to Stag, Drik, and the others from the Cutter's Dip.
"Shar take you!" he commanded, pointing at each of them in turn. "Shar take you! Shar take you!"
One by one, they vanished into the shadows. His friends and the cultists just laughed louder and cheered him.
"The Mistress of Night has chosen," roared Jarull. "And she has chosen Keph!"
Only one person was no longer laughing. Bolan glared at Keph, his eyes dark holes in his white face. Keph faced him

and slowly raised his hand once more.
"Shar take you," he said.
The darkness that swallowed Bolan burst out of his eyes and swarmed across his face—Shar took her priest from the inside out. Variance reached across the table and touched Keph's arm.
"The Mistress of the Night has a great destiny for you," she said. "You'll take his place."
"Oh, yes," said a bitter voice. "That's Keph—always taking someone else's place."
Feena thrashed desperately, trying to shake her trembling legs free of the tattered remains of her gown. Dhauna kept the light on her. Its radiance was maddening—she could feel it pressing against her, glaring in her eyes and throbbing in her brain as if she had stared too long at reflections in water on a bright day. Feena tried to change back, but couldn't. The magic stirred the wolf in her even as it dazed the woman. A thin, helpless whimper forced its way out of her throat.
"Be silent!" Dhauna hissed. "You brought this on yourself." With her free hand she fumbled for the holy symbol at her neck. The chain snapped, and Dhauna held the symbol up. "Tremble before Selune for her gaze is upon you!"
Magic crushed down on Feena. Her whine rose as Selune's power shifted and changed like gathering storm clouds, the goddess's will tearing through her already shaken spirit.
No, some part of her thought, not Selune's will— Dhauna's. The magic might descend from Night's Bright Lady, but spun out in the prayers of a mortal, it was nothing more than a blunt club wielded by Dhauna's madness.
Feena desperately clung to that thought in the face of the dark fear that flooded over her. Rage flared in Dhauna's eyes. The old priestess thrust Selune's symbol at her.
"By the Moonmaiden!" she cried. "By the Bright Lady of Night and Our Silver Lady!" She took a step forward.
"You—"

She took another step. Feena scrambled back.
"—wiM—"
Another step. Feena cowered.
"—yield!"
Energy, invisible and formless, surged in the rawest expression of Selune's faith, the ultimate power of the goddess of the moon over a creature of the night. It ripped away any illusion of control, and Feena howled as helpless terror seized her, wolf and woman recoiling as one from Selune's high priestess. Instinct took over. She scrambled back, tripping over her own legs in panic. A stack of scrolls blocked her way. Her claws shredded the ancient parchments as she thrust herself as far as possible from Dhauna.
Cold stone stopped her. She pressed herself into a corner, the hair on her neck bristling high, her teeth bared.
Dhauna turned with her, one hand still presenting Selune's symbol, the other still clenched around silver light.
"You are weak, Feena Archwood," she raved. "Weak and foolish! I am Selune's hope. Her warnings speak to me, and through me the New Moon Pact will be reborn! Through me, her faith will be cleansed. I will be her hand. There will be no fear. There will be no heresy, and no heretics." Her eyes narrowed. "Have they taken you, Feena?" she asked. "Have they already caught you in their web of lies?"
The words barely pierced Feena's terror. All she could do was growl at her tormentor. Saliva fell in a long string from her mouth. Dhauna bared her own teeth in response.
"You will be restored, Feena. I promise that. You will see I'm right. I do this out of love for Our Silver Lady." Her eyes shone fever bright. "Now do what your goddess calls you to do!"
She took a step forward.
Cornered, driven beyond fear, Feena snarled, snapped—then leaped. Powerful jaws bit down, tearing into Dhauna's outstretched arm. Dhauna shrieked as she stumbled

backward under the wolfs weight. Blood spurted hot in Feena's mouth.
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Keph turned to look down the table. Roderio looked back at him. His brother sat—along with Strasus, Dagnalla, Malia, and Krin—at the dining table of Fourstaves Hall. Just as they had for breakfast. Keph's breakfast was laid out before him as well. The Sky's Mantle was gone. So were the Sharrans except for Jarull and Variance. They stood behind him, hands on his shoulders. Keph stared at Roderio.
"What do you mean by that?" Keph demanded.
Roderio snorted derisively and said, "Just what I said, little brother." He pushed his breakfast away. "You're always taking someone else's place, borrowing someone else's power. From the day you were born, always 'Mama, I want Rodo's food! Mama, I want Rodo's toys!'" Roderio's voice rose high and whining. "'Da, I want magic like Rodo and Mali!'"
"Roderio," said Dagnalla, "don't taunt your brother. He's too young to know any better."
Roderio just made a face. "So now you're going to be Shar's dark priest, is that it, Keph? You're still just borrowing power. Even if you have magic now, it's not yours. It's Shar's."
"Shut your mouth!" screamed Keph. He lifted a clenched fist and opened it.
Dark, glittering magesbane dust was heaped on his palm. He flung it at Roderio.
His anger caught it and turned it into a shining, swarming cloud. Suddenly his brother was flailing back away from the table, shrieking and tearing at his clothes as glittering particles settled onto his skin and collapsed into drops of thick, yellow-green acid. His robes began to
smolder. When he turned to Keph again, huge red sores had been eaten into his face. Acid poured in smoking streams from his eyes. Skin was sloughing off his melting hands.
"Keph..."he choked.

Fear stabbed into Keph's heart. What had he done?
"Rodo!" he gasped, and started to rise.
Hands held him firm.
"Tell me you regret it," said Jarull.
"The agony of an enemy's spirit is joy to the Mistress of the Night," said Variance.
Keph watched Roderio slump into formless, bilious ooze.
"No!" he shouted, struggling to stand. Variance's grip tightened harshly and she look down on him.
"False regret," she hissed. "Everything that you've done, you've done deliberately."
"Keph?" Malia said, staring at him in loathing and hatred. Krin and Dagnalla were staring too. Only Strasus kept eating, oblivious as Malia spat at her youngest brother. "This was no accident? You did this?"
He shook his head in desperate denial, but his sister was already rising. Her staff was in her hands, a shimmer of force surrounding it. Dagnalla held a staff as well. Krin was drawing a wand.
Jarull held out his fist. From between his fingers, black grains of magesbane sifted down. He opened his hand and flicked his wrist. Dust scattered through the air like a wave of shadow. Keph sucked in a breath.
"Mali!" he shouted, straining forward. "Don't—"
Too late. Malia held up her staff, spoke a sharp word, and the magesbane exploded.
The blast was deafening. It slammed Keph back into his chair and hammered against his chest. He felt dry grit, like wind-blown sand, sting his cheeks, but he couldn't see anything—the explosion was dark and cold, without heat or light. Keph screamed against it, flinging up an arm to protect his face—pure reflex—but it was already too late.
Variance and Jarull swayed, their grip on him firm.
Silence followed. Keph lowered his arm and stared at the devastation. Black dust hung thick in the air. The dining table was gone, with only a few scattered splinters to mark

its passing. The walls of Fourstaves House were broken stone, the roof and upper floors blasted away. Keph could see the black sky looming close above.
There was no sign of Dagnalla, Malia, Krin, or the foul ooze that had been Roderio.
Or of Strasus. His father was gone.
Keph sat back. His heart felt... dark. And empty.
"Shar's blessing," said Jarull. "The Lady of Loss touches you."
His hands were gone from Keph's shoulder. So were Variance's. Keph rose unsteadily and turned around to find them facing him, silently watching" He swallowed.
"This isn't what I wanted," he said.
"You made the sacrifice," Variance replied. "Your family for Shar's embrace." She held out the sacrificial knife, the same one Bolan had put into his hand in Shar's temple only five nights before. Keph stared at it. Blood stained the blade. Adrey's blood.
"No," he breathed. "That was an illusion. Adrey—"
Doors banged open behind him. He spun around.
A woman in a swordfighter's costume strode through the ruins of Fourstaves House. Lyraene. No, Keph realized with a start, not Lyraene.
Adrey. Grown up.
"I want to be like you, Uncle Keph," she said. "I want to fight like you."
Shar's disk hung around her neck.
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It was over in an instant.
The glare of Dhauna's magical moonlight vanished with Feena's attack. Conscious thought returned with a slap of clarity. Feena opened her jaws in shock. Dhauna's arm slipped free, and the old woman dropped to the
ground and curled up around her torn arm. Footsteps pounded in the hallway outside. There were voices:
"What's going on?"
"I don't know!"

"Did you hear that? Moonmaiden's grace—" "It's locked!"
"Stand aside! Bright Lady of the Night, lend me your strength!"
The clergy were coming in. Feena reached into her spirit. The wolf gave no resistance as she drew the woman back to the surface. The transformation felt like nothing at all—she shook herself back into human form just as the door of Dhauna's chamber groaned and tore out of its frame. Mifano shoved it out of the way and stumbled into the chamber—then froze. Clustered at the door, other priests and priestesses stopped as well, all of them staring in horror.
In the midst of shredded scrolls and torn clothing, Feena rose up above Dhauna's huddled, shivering form-naked, blood-smeared, and completely numb.
She drew herself up and moved toward the door. Mifano stood aside. Selune's clergy leaped to get out of her way. Feena walked past them all and out into the corridor, turning toward her room in silent, brittle dignity.
Blood dripped from her chin onto her breast. She stopped and turned to the nearest person—Jhezzail—and said, "Younger sister..."
Jhezzail made no reply. Feena continued anyway.
"The High Moonmistress must be taken to the infirmary immediately and given a sprig of belladonna to eat. A fresh sprig. It will prevent her from becoming a werewolf." She focused on the girl. "Do you understand?"
"Y-yes, elder sister," Jhezzail stammered.
Feena turned away.
Sounds forced their way into her haze. Shouting. Screaming. Crying. Her name—Julith was calling her. Feena didn't answer.
She reached her room, opened the door, stepped through, and closed the door. Noises still reached her,
including Julith's frantic calls. Footsteps raced along the hall outside, drawing nearer—Julith again, she was certain of it. Feena shot the bolt on the door, then sagged down against

the rough wood as Julith began to pound against it from the other side.
The high, keening whine that welled up from deep inside Feena's belly belonged more to the wolf than to the woman, but the despair and horror behind it were entirely human.
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Adrey moved across the rubble strewn floor like a serpent. As she moved, she reached across her body and drew her sword. It left its scabbard with a dry hiss. Keph gasped.
She was carrying Quick.
A dark smile flickered across her face as she saw his surprise.
"It seemed appropriate," she said. "You already have the knife you used to kill me."
Keph glanced down. Shar's sacrificial knife was in his hand. He jerked and flung it away.
"Adrey," he said, "I didn't kill you!"
"You might as well have." Her voice was as cold as a winter wind. She lifted Quick, holding the rapier in front of her face. "Storm's lash!"
The lightning that writhed around the blade, bitterly white, brought no light to the darkened hall. Fear trembled through Keph's belly. He raised his hand and the disk of Shar that dangled from it.
"Shar-" he gasped. "Shar-"
"Shar take me?" Adrey laughed. "Uncle Keph, she already has. Don't you know any other spells?"
Mistress of the Night, he prayed, guide me.
Keph didn't speak the words, but they echoed in the hall just the same. Keph's gut twisted. An orison. One orison. Shar's guidance had shown him nothing more than damnation.
Adrey sank into a dueling pose, and Keph stumbled back.
"Adrey, I didn't mean it!"
"False regret does not become Shar's chosen," she snarled.
"No!" Keph spat. "It's not false. I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"
"Too late, Uncle Keph!"

She lunged and he twisted desperately. Quick slid past his belly, close enough that he could smell the lightning on her blade. Keph grabbed Adrey's extended arm and pulled her off balance, using the momentum to leap past her.

Through the open doors where she had entered, there was light—twilight, the hot glow of sunset, the only true light in the hall.

Keph glanced over his shoulder. Adrey was back on her feet and coming after him. He turned back to the doorway, but Jarull and Variance barred his path.

"It's too late to back out now," Jarull said.

"The cult," said Variance, "must be protected."

He gulped—and dived between them.

For a moment it seemed like it might work. The light drew closer. He was almost there, almost out of the hall.

Hands closed on his legs. He hit the ground screaming and kicked out. Hands fell away but grabbed again.

"Too late," Variance chanted, "Too late."

Keph glanced up at her. She wasn't human anymore—her legs vanished in writhing darkness, while a dozen arms sprouted from her shoulders to twine around his legs. Her eyes were black. When she spoke, shadows escaped from her tongue in wisps.

When she smiled, deepest night itself shone through.

"Shar embraces you, Keph. She has plans for you. She's not going to let you go so easily."

She began to pull on his legs, slowly, irresistibly, dragging him back toward the darkness where Adrey waited with Quick and Jarull with Shar's knife. Keph choked and thrashed hard—

—and sat up in his bed, sheets twisted around his legs. The light of sunset lanced through a gap in the curtains over his window. Somewhere a fly buzzed slowly, back and forth.

He was drenched in sweat. His hair was soaked with it. When he rubbed his hands across his face, it ran between his

fingers in fat drops.
She's not going to let you go so easily.

## CHAPTER 11

Full night had finally fallen. Moonshadow Hall had slipped, if not into slumber, then at least into the uncomfortable quiet that followed in the wake of horror. Through her window, Feena could hear Dhauna's intermittent shrieks and inarticulate curses as they echoed up from the infirmary and across the inner courtyard.
She closed her eyes for a moment and murmured, "Forgive me."
Feena crossed to the door of her chamber—old sandals making no noise on the floor, homespun skirt and linen blouse whispering around her body—and opened the door.
Outside, Jhezzail started. Feena bit back a wince. She'd expected there would be someone watching her door. She'd hoped it wouldn't be someone she liked.
"Be at ease," she said.
One hand made a sign. The other touched
her medallion. Jhezzail's eyes widened for a moment as Selune's magic took hold of her, then drooped and softened, her fear washed away. Her arms fell down to her sides. She didn't move as Feena approached, but her eyes followed her closely.
"Velsinore commanded me to watch your door and summon her if you came out," the acolyte said with utter calm.
"I guessed that," Feena replied. "What's been happening in the temple?"
"I don't know. I've been here all evening. I think Velsinore and Mifano have been in the infirmary with Mother Dhauna."
"And Julith?"
"They shut her out. She's waiting in the winter chapel." A spark glimmered in Jhezzail's placid eyes and she added, "She asked me to let her know if you came out."
Of course, Feena thought. Julith would do that.
Feena raised her chin and said, "Thank you, Jhezzail. I'm

sorry I have to do this." Before the acolyte could react, she thrust out her fingers once more. "Bright Lady of Night," she prayed, "hold her fast!"

The calm in Jhezzail's eyes flashed in alarm, but it was too late. The power of the spell locked her muscles and joints, paralyzing her. Feena acted swiftly, darting back into her room and emerging with the patiently torn strips that had been her bed linens. The calming spell had been necessary to draw information out of the acolyte, but neither it nor the spell of holding would last long. Feena gagged Jhezzail first, then swiftly lashed her arms to her body. Grasping her tightly, she dismissed the magic. Jhezzail's muscles sagged.

The girl struggled, but Feena hoisted her over one shoulder and carried her quickly into her chamber. She dumped her on the bed, then grabbed her legs, forcing them together so she could bind them. Behind her gag, Jhezzail was screaming. The torn cloth turned the wails into a high-pitched whine.

"I'm sorry, Jhezzail," Feena apologized. "I truly am. I admire your faith. Please tell Julith that I think you'll be a great priestess someday."

Long strips of fabric bound the acolyte to the bed frame so she couldn't roll off. Jhezzail's eyes were wild with fear. Feena turned away to avoid meeting them.

She shut the door of the chamber but didn't try to lock or block it. When other acolytes or clergy realized Jhezzail was gone from her post, it would be easy enough for them to rescue her. Feena prayed that the acolyte wouldn't be missed too soon—two hours, maybe more. That would be enough time.

The corridors of Moonshadow Hall were deserted. The clerics were probably either seeking solace in prayer or huddled with the frightened acolytes, trying to mend their faith in the face of the day's events. Feena kept a sharp watch anyway, creeping through the shadows to the refectory, into the silent kitchens beyond, and out through the stout door,

into the little garden. She gave the old, mossy pillar a fond brush of farewell, then hopped over the wall and out of Moonshadow Hall.

She didn't want anyone to see a wolf running in Yhaunn's shadows again, so she didn't change form. Instead she stayed on two legs as she trotted through the silent streets of the city, climbing steadily up toward the city gates that she'd passed through fourteen nights before.

In the sky above, the moon was only the barest sliver of a crescent, as if even Selune were hiding her face in shame. Feena's chest ached. Sobs had wracked her through the afternoon, and through the long twilight of evening. Inside, she felt broken.

The water in the basin in her room was stained red with Dhauna Myritar's blood. Feena could still taste the tang of it in her mouth—and thinking about it only brought the taste back stronger than before. Sharp. Salty. Warm. Tingling like copper on the tip of her tongue, heavy like iron against the roof of her mouth.

Feena clenched her teeth and forced the memory away. No more sobs. No more tears. Her eyes were dry. She couldn't cry anymore. She might never cry again. Dhauna's betrayal felt like a void in her very spirit—Dhauna's betrayal and her own loss of control in striking down her old friend and teacher.

There was no point to staying at Moonshadow Hall any longer. High manners and elegant gowns wouldn't convince Selune's clergy anymore. The priests and priestesses, acolytes and devotees would shun her. Mifano and Velsinore would be merciless. There would be no more games or petty humiliations. At the very least, they would do to her exactly what she was doing to herself— banishment, exile—if she was lucky.

And if word escaped Moonshadow Hall of what had happened, the people of Yhaunn would shun the temple itself in horror. They might do more. Feena had a vision of a

mob, Noyle and the other denizens of the Cutter's Dip at its head, descending on the graceful white walls and blackening them with the smoke of a thousand torches.
A wave of fear swept over her at the thought. She clutched for the nearest wall, holding herself up. When the moment passed, she drew herself up straight.
It was better to remove herself from Yhaunn before any of that came to pass. Dhauna's dreams, the dreams that had drawn her to the city and that had held her within it, were nothing more than the nightmares of a mad, old woman. The only heresy, the only danger, was in Dhauna's age-tortured mind. The New Moon Pact... a horrid coincidence, a tale encountered in chance that had taken root in madness.
Feena's hand strayed to her medallion, caressing the nicked and worn surface.
Moonmaiden have mercy on Mother Dhauna, she prayed silently. Let her wake tomorrow and remember nothing but peace.
She wished she could hope for the same.
The street opened up ahead of her, broadening into a wide plaza before the keep that hunched over the city gates. Like many of the merchant cities of Sembia, Yhaunn seldom closed her gates, even by night. At so late
an hour, though, the guards on duty did take extra care with who they let in—and who they let out. Feena found herself waiting behind a tall riding horse that had been loaded down with bulging saddlebags like a common mule. One of the gate guards was inspecting the bags dubiously while his partner questioned the horse's dismounted rider.
"Hey, Grat," he called forward. "Seems he packed like a half ling in a hurry, too!''
The other guard's voice rumbled off the stone walls of the keep, "Packed in a hurry, riding fast, wanting to get out the gate later than an honest man has reason to—if you don't want to tell us where you're headed to, maybe you want to tell us what you're running from."

"Look," argued the rider, "I swear I haven't done anything wrong. I just want to leave."
His voice was angry, but also frightened. And strangely familiar. Feena stepped around to the other side of the horse. The man who clutched the animal's reins as if they were his mother's apron strings was Keph Thingoleir.
She ducked back and her nose wrinkled. Based on what she had seen from Keph in the Stiltways the other night, she could easily guess at any number of reasons he might feel the need to get out of Yhaunn fast. Whatever it was, with so much stuffed into his bags, it didn't look like the young man was coming back any time soon.
Feena pressed her lips together. It was tempting to simply slip away and let the guards deal as they would with Keph, then come back later. Keph had, after all, sneered at her offer to return his aid. Anything he was running from, he probably deserved.
But what if Stag and Drik had started looking for revenge? He didn't deserve that.
In spite of what the young man might think, she did owe him.
"Moonmaiden's grace," she cursed. "One last time and never again!" She drew herself up and stood tall, then stepped out from behind Keph's horse, carrying herself with the poise that Julith had taught her. "Goodmen!"
All three men stared, Keph most of all. Feena stopped in front of the guards.
"I speak for Moonshadow Hall,'' she said. "I will vouch for this man. Let him pass."
The guards glanced at each other. Annoyance crossed the face of the one that had been examining Keph's bags and he started to speak, but his partner, deep-voiced Grat, slapped him across the gut.
"Your pardon... uhhh... priestess," he said with gruff respect. "Do you have any way to prove your authority?"
He stared at her rough country clothes with some

uncertainty, but Feena caught his eye and held it.
"I am Feena Archwood, Moonmistress-Designate of Moonshadow Hall." The words slipped off her tongue too easily. She had to force herself not to tremble at what had become nothing more than a brazen lie. She lifted her chin and held Selune's medallion up for them to see. "If that's not enough to satisfy you, you may call on Guard Captain Manas. I'm certain he will be pleased to come down at this hour and confirm my identity."
Grat swallowed. "Ahh... I don't think there's a need for that, Moonmistress." He glanced at Keph. The young man was still staring at Feena, his eyes so wide they looked ready to pop right out of his face. "This one has the look of someone with something to hide, though."
"He did me a service some nights ago, sir," Feena told him. "If he passes through the gate in my charge, will you let him go?"
"I...we..."
Grat looked to the Other guard. Feena raised an eyebrow and turned to Keph.
"Does the city guard have any reason to pursue you?" she demanded. "Have you broken any of the laws of Yhaunn or Sembia?" Keph blinked and shook his head mutely. Feena looked back to Grat. "In Selune's name, I say that I believe him. Let us pass."
Grat stared at her—then stepped aside. "Thank you," Feena said. "Mount, Keph."
The young man scrambled to obey.
"Do you not have a horse, Moonmistress?" asked the second guard, obviously suspicious. Feena turned her glare on him, and he flinched away. She put her back to him and marched on to the gates.
A moment later, hoofbeats followed, quick at first then slowing as Keph caught up to her and matched the pace of his horse to her stride. The young man stared down at her with an expression of awe.

"Feena, I-"
"Keep quiet," she hissed.
The slow rhythm of his horse's hooves was the only sound as they passed through the gates and out of Yhaunn. The road to Ordulin stretched out in the starlight before them. And beyond Ordulin... Feena drew a deep breath. Arch Wood village. Home.
She could tell that Keph was watching her, sneaking quick, confused glances in the darkness. She didn't say anything, and somewhat to her surprise, he didn't say anything either.
Too arrogant to admit he was wrong in rejecting me before, Feena thought, too ashamed to find I've come to his rescue this time, and too startled to find that the countrywoman he scrapped alongside is also a haughty priestess.
Her mouth twisted. No, she reminded herself. That's not me. I'm not that woman.
She started to turn aside, toward the stand of trees that housed the little clearing where she'd first encountered Stag and Drik. She could change there. Her wolf form was more suited to travel, especially at night—even if the thought of becoming the animal that had attacked Dhauna put a knot in her stomach.
"Good night, Keph," she said. "Safe journey."
"Feena?" The young man twisted in his saddle and asked, "Where are you going?"
"There's a path," she lied. "My journey lies that way."
"Wait. I'll come with you."
He pulled on the reins, turning his horse. Feena stiffened.
"What?" she asked. "Why?"
She couldn't quite make out his expression, but Keph's voice was tight. "I need..." He choked, hesitated, then seemed to change his mind. "Thank you for helping me," he said.
"You helped me at the Cutter's Dip," she said. "I owed you."
"I told you that you owed me nothing, but you helped me anyway." He urged his horse over toward her and asked, "Can I travel with you?"

"I don't need your protection, Keph."
The words came out more harshly than she'd intended. Keph was quiet for a moment.
"Sorry," he said finally. "I didn't mean to say you did. It's just... It's a dark night. I'd like the company. Please."
Feena glanced toward the trees. In her wolf form, she could move fast, trimming a day or more from her travels, but...
One night won't make a difference,'her knotted gut argued. Stay human for one more night.
"All right," she said, and her stomach relaxed. "We'd best stay on the road though."
"What about the path?"
"I'll pick up another one later."
They walked in silence until Keph shifted uncomfortably and said, "Feena, do you mind if I make a light?" "There's nothing to see."
"The dark is getting on my nerves." He turned and reached for his saddle bags. "I have a sunrod..."
Feena clicked her tongue. "Too bright," she said. "We wouldn't be able to see anything beyond it. Let me."
She picked up a fist-sized stone from the road. A prayer to Selune brought the glow of a full moon to it, bright enough to dispel the darkness around them, not so bright as to completely spoil their night vision.
"Better?" she asked, passing the stone up to him.
He hesitated before taking it.
"Thank you," he said.
He settled the stone into the crook of his arm, cradling it, then looked down at her. In the magical light, she finally got a good look at his face. He still seemed thunderstruck at her presence. She looked away uncomfortably.
Most of the land in that part of Sembia was farmers' fields and pastures. Low hedgerows separated fields from the road. Feena listened to the rustlings of small creatures in the hedges as their illuminated passing disturbed the nocturnal activities of mice, small birds, and badgers. A fox crouched

in the shadows, eyes gleaming.
"You never asked me where I was going," Keph said with the abruptness of someone desperate to break a silence.
Feena glanced up at him and replied, "You didn't ask me where I was going either."
She looked back to the hedgerow. The fox was gone. Keph hadn't even noticed it.
"So," he ventured, "where are you going?"
"Arch Wood."
His face creased. "That's northwest of Selgaunt, isn't it? Right on the border with the Dalelands? It's a long way."
"My village is there." "Ah."
They walked a little farther.
"What's your village like?" he asked finally.
"Small," said Feena. "I suppose it's more of a hamlet, but no one there would ever admit to it. There's only a few houses clustered around a mill really, with a blacksmith on the other side of the mill run. My mother's cottage—my cottage," she corrected herself, "is out beyond the smith's."
"It sounds nice," Keph said. "Why are you going back?"
"I've had enough of Yhaunn," Feena said. She managed to keep the bitterness out of her voice. "Moonshadow Hall has lots of priestesses. Arch Wood needs me back." She looked up at Keph and asked, "What about you?"
He shrugged and said, "Ordulin, I guess. Then maybe Selgaunt or Saerloon."
"Wherever the road goes?" asked Feena. Keph nodded. "You did leave Yhaunn in a hurry, didn't you?" When he nodded again she asked, "Am I going to regret helping you?"
He fell silent, his eyes suddenly dark. Feena frowned. "Keph?"
"You might," he said.
He took a deep breath and drew something out of his pouch, then opened his hand to let it dangle from his fingers.
A disk of Shar.
Feena gasped and leaped away, eyes searching the night for

signs of an ambush.
"Feena!" Keph shouted. "It's not what you think!"
He kicked his feet free of his stirrups and slithered out of the saddle, still clutching the glowing stone in one hand and Shar's symbol in the other. Feena whirled to face him.
"Stay back!" she growled at him, stepping away. He held his arms wide and said, "Please, listen to me. This isn't a trap." "What is it then?" "I need your help," he pleaded.
Feena stared at him in shock. There were tears running down his cheeks. His outstretched arms were trembling.
"I didn't know you were a Selunite, Feena. I swear I didn't. I wouldn't have helped you if I had—not then, anyway. And you know I didn't expect to see you at the gate tonight. But now..." He choked. "Selune is Shar's enemy, isn't she? You have to help me, Feena. Please. I'm running away!"
She stared. A Sharran running away... Her stomach convulsed. Her chest—still aching from sobs—heaved.
And she laughed. A short, bitter bark. Her mouth twisted.
"Well," she said. "I guess that makes two of us."
Selune was slowly sliding down against the night sky behind them. In the eastern distance, Yhaunn threw up almost as much light as the slivered moon, the combined glare of thousands of lanterns and torches a stain of brightness in the dark. Because the city was sunk down in its quarry, that stain was really all there was to see of it. It was strange, Feena thought—Yhaunn was only really there when you were right down in it.
She and Keph sat together on a hilltop not too far off the road, looking back the way they had come, the glowing stone set between them. Down along the hill's slope, the young man's horse chomped contentedly at summer dry grass. Its pale hide shone ghostlike on the fringes of the magical moonlight.
Feena took a pull at a bottle of surprisingly good wine—Keph really had packed his bags in a rush—and passed it back to him. He drank as well, then stared at the bottle without

saying anything.
"There's no rush, Keph," she told him. "Take your fime. We still have half a bottle left."
Keph sighed. "There's not really much else to tell. After the dream, I knew there was only one thing I could do." He sat with one leg stretched out and the other bent, one arm draped around it. He took another gulp of wine, then rested his cheek on his arm. "I was wrong about so much, but Variance, Jarull, Bolan—Shar—none of them were going to let me go easily. If I stayed, what would happen to Adrey? To the rest of my family?" He looked up. "So I ran."
"You can't outrun a goddess, Keph."
"But I can try to keep anyone else from getting hurt, can't I?"
"You can do that." Feena stretched out her arm, and Keph gave her the bottle. "Wouldn't Mifano and Velsinore love to see this? As if they didn't have enough to turn against me, I'm sitting and drinking wine with a Sharran."
Keph snorted and said, "Just this morning, I wouldn't have even thought about having wine with a Selunite. Let alone the werewolf who killed Cyrume."
Feena growled under her breath and bared her teeth.
"The Sharran at the well in the Stiltways?" she said. "I didn't kill him."
Keph looked at her, surprised.
"But everyone says—"
"If I'd had to," Feena said. "I would have. He was going to poison that well." She drank from the bottle. "But I didn't have to. He killed himself rather than face me. He died with Shar's name on his lips. I didn't touch him. But Moonmaiden's grace, I'd like to know who did! It's almost as if I were being set up." She took another sip and set the bottle aside. "Why would this Cyrume try to poison the well anyway?"
"As an act of devotion to Shar, I suppose," Keph said sourly. "We—" His face twisted. "Sharrans are supposed perform a

dark deed at least once every tenday. Jarull said poisoning the well was Variance's idea. Apparently the cult was smaller and a lot less aggressive before she came along."
"That would probably explain why Moonshadow Hall had no idea they were in the city." Feena stared back at the stain of Yhaunn. "Where did she come from?"
"Jarull says the Temple of Old Night beneath Calimport."
Feena's eyes narrowed. "I've heard rumors about that place. It's supposed to be the ancient seat of Sharran power, the oldest of Shar's temples."
"Bolan and Jarull never said much about it. They just went really quiet whenever they mentioned it."
"Jarull..." Feena glanced at Keph. "Your friend seems to have taken to his conversion zealously."
"I guess he has," Keph said. "What am I going to do, Feena? Have I damned myself over stupid revenge?"
Feena sighed again and rubbed her medallion between her fingers.
"I don't really know," she said. "I'm no philosopher. For what it's worth, I don't think you did anything wrong. Think about the initiation Bolan put you through. You swore no oaths. The sacrifice you made was only an illusion. And you're repentant. There's hope, I think." "And what I did to Lyraene?"
Feena said, "That you'll have to live with, Keph. It was no noble act. You'll carry the stain of it for the rest of your life."
"I guess I have to expect that," Keph replied. He stared out at the distant, dark horizon. "But what about the orison? I felt Shar's power, and I channeled it..."
"You couldn't have." Feena scowled. "A priest has to take oaths and training. It sounds too easy, too convenient. It must have been some trick. There's a spell that lets a priestess share the power of her faith with someone else. If Variance worked that on you, it might have felt like you were casting an orison when it was really Variance's magic." She closed her eyes and scrubbed her knuckles against her

forehead. "The thing you have to fear is Shar's cult, not the goddess herself."
The young man blinked. "I shouldn't be running?"
"Oh, you should be running," Feena said. She opened her eyes again and gave him a long look. "They've gone to a lot of trouble to seduce you. They're up to something, and like you say, I don't think they'll give up easily."
Keph exhaled slowly and shuddered. He leaned back, stretching out on the grass and staring up at the star-speckled sky.
"What if I came to Arch Wood with you?" he asked after a moment. "Just for a little while. The Sharrans won't think to look for me there, will they?"
Feena groaned, "Oh, aye. That should cause some talk. I go aWay and come back with a man ten years younger than me and a price on my head in Yhaunn..." She looked at him and asked, "Are you so sure you want to travel with a werewolf who'll tear into her oldest friends?"
For a moment, Keph was silent, then he rolled over onto his side to look into her eyes.
"For what it's worth," he said, "I don't think you did anything wrong either. Dhauna manipulated you. Just like Variance manipulated me."
Feena stared at him—and raised her eyes to Selune's crescent.
"Moonmaiden's grace," she whispered, "aren't we just the best people to give each other advice?" She smiled and sighed, "Thank you, Keph." She picked up the wine bottle and offered it to him. "How about a toast? To the two most gullible fools in Yhaunn."
"Not so gullible anymore," Keph said. "And never again in Yhaunn."
He reached for the bottle—
—and let it slip through his fingers to tumble onto the ground.
"Listen!" he gasped.

Feena heard it too: a wild cascade of hooves in the night. Someone was riding hard and fast along the Ordulin road. A sudden foreboding struck her. She grabbed the glowing rock and willed the magic to fade. Darkness wrapped around them. Keph ran for his horse and Feena scrambled for the crest of the hill and a better view. Staying low, she scanned the road's length.

A lone rider moved in a broad patch of bright moonlight, galloping west from Yhaunn like a madman. Or a madwoman, Feena thought. As the rider drew closer, Feena slid down from the hilltop. Keph was already mounted, his overstuffed saddlebags abandoned.

"Is it the Sharrans?" he gasped.

"No," said Feena. "The rider travels in moonlight. It's one of my people."

"What do you want to do?"

The hoofbeats were even closer.

"Wait," she said. "We'll face her. I think I know who it is. If she finds us, then she deserves to."

Out on the road, the rider slowed then stopped. The horse whinnied in alarm as its rider pulled hard on the reins, wheeling the animal around and back to a narrow gap in the hedgerow. Heels kicked into the horse's side
and sent it cantering across a field of swaying grain toward the hill.

"Feena!" shouted Julith. "Feena, where are you? I know you're close!"

Feena stepped forward and called, "Here!"

Julith spun her horse around, then slid out of the saddle and ran toward her.

"Feena! Moonmaiden's grace, Feena—thank Selune I found you."

Her hair was wild, blown and tangled by her ride. She spread her arms. Feena hesitated, then opened her arms to accept the young priestess's embrace.

"I'm sorry, Julith," she sighed. "So much happened. There

was too much to say. I just couldn't stay in Yhaunn any-"
Julith stiffened, staring up. "Who—?" she gasped. Feena twisted her head to see Keph looming over them on his horse.
"Keph Thingoleir," Feena said. "That's another story." She ran a hand over Julith's flushed, wind-burned face. "What are you doing out here, Julith? Why come after me?"
"To warn you." Julith hugged Feena then pushed her away. "We found Jhezzail. Mifano and Velsinore are coming after you and they're bringing half of Moonshadow Hall with them."
Feena's eyes went wide. "What are you talking about?"
"They mean to take you back by force, Feena. They think your attack on Mother Dhauna was deliberate."
"But you don't," Feena said. The realization felt like a weight lifted from her.
"I know you would never do something like that of your own free will," Julith said as she dug into a satchel that she wore slung at her side. "They're going to be an hour or so behind me. The only reason I managed to get out ahead of them is because they were arguing over the best magic to use to find you. They'll be working together by now and on your trail."
"How did you manage to find me, then?" Feena asked.
"Unlike Velsinore and Mifano," the younger priestess said with a smile, "I know you, Feena. I knew that if you were running, you'd be heading back to Arch Wood. I just rode in the right direction, and while I rode, I prayed to Selune to guide me. And she answered my prayer."
"I—" Feena pressed her lips together, then exhaled slowly. "Thank you," she said.
"Don't thank me just yet," said Julith. She pulled out a gray bundle tied up with a leather strap. "This is how you carry your clothes while you're in wolf form, right?" Feena blinked and nodded. Julith breathed a sigh of relief. "Good." She thrust the bundle at her. "That's a robe. Take off your

clothes, change into your wolf form, and get back to Moonshadow Hall."
"But if Mifano and Velsinore are coming after me, why would I want to run to them?"
"You wouldn't," Julith answered, looking her in the eye. "You need to get back for Mother Dhauna's sake."
Feena's heart sank.
"What's happened?" she asked.
"She let Chandri heal her wounds, but when Velsinore tried to give her the belladonna you prescribed, she refused it. Velsinore tried casting healing magic on her as well, but Mother Dhauna resisted that, too." Julith swallowed. "Then she prayed to Selune herself, asking her to send her brightest light."
Selune's brightest light...
"The light of a full moon?" Feena asked, and Julith nodded. Feena sucked in her breath. "Moonmaiden's grace, she's forced herself to transform into a werewolf!"

## CHAPTER 12

Keph watched color spring back into Feena's face. Her jaw shifted in determination. She dropped the gray bundle to the ground and began to loosen the drawstring of her skirt. He stared, then turned away.
It felt very much like he was on the periphery of events. Whatever was happening at Moonshadow Hall didn't involve him. Feena had helped him just by talking to him—but what was he to her? Just a misguided enemy of her faith she'd only met once before. Her real devotion lay with her old friends and her own mistakes.
Something inside him raged at being ignored, just as Strasus and Dagnalla had ignored him, but he fought it down, swallowing the arrogance that had brought him so much trouble.
"Wouldn't she have changed at the next full moon anyway?" he asked over his shoulder.
"The next full moon. A tenday and a half from

now. We..." Feena's voice caught. "Moonshadow Hall would have been ready."
"She caught us off guard," said Julith. "The clergy present managed to keep her back, but just barely. She needs your help, Feena. You're the one who knows the most about lycanthrope. Mother Dhauna was locked in a chamber in the infirmary when I left. She's like a w'ld animal."
"She is a wild animal," Feena said. "That's the chamber I used to be locked in when I changed as a girl. Julith, what are you doing?"
Keph glanced around out of reflex.
Feena was naked. Before her, Julith was also undressing—and swiftly donning Feena's discarded clothes. Keph gulped and looked away again. He heard Feena growl at him.
"Keph, don't be an idiot." "Sorry," he muttered.
He swallowed and turned back around. Under the moonlight, Feena's skin shone like ivory. Her arms and legs were long, lean, and muscular. The moonlight had leeched the color from her hair, turning flaming red into lustrous copper. If Selune herself had stepped down onto that field, she couldn't have chosen a more beautiful, vigorous form. He bit back a gasp and forced his eyes away before he could stare too long.
Julith pulled Feena's blouse down over her head. The other woman's country clothes hung ridiculously loose on her frame.
Julith shook her head in response to Feena's stare and said, "I'm not mad." She reached into her satchel again and produced a slim case of worked silver. "Jewelry and baubles aren't the only treasures in Moonshadow Hall's chests."
She touched the case and it sprang open. Inside, two square vials of crystal wound with silver filigree nestled side by side. The liquid inside them caught the moonlight and reflected it back in a blue-white glow.
"Temple records refer to this as Iraelathe's Escape,"
Julith said, "presented to a High Moonmistress over three

hundred years ago by a worshipful devotee. When the vials are replaced in the case and the case placed in moonlight, the potions regenerate themselves with the turning of the moon."
"What do they do?" asked Feena.
"Tonight, they'll help us outwit Mifano and Velsinore." She held out her free hand. "I need three strands of your hair. Wrap them around my finger."
Feena reached up and plucked at her scalp, then twisted fine red hairs around one of Julith's fingers like a delicate ring, carefully knotting the ends so they wouldn't come free,
"Now," said Julith, "you take the potion on the right. I take the potion on the left. We drink them at the same time."
Keph watched the two priestesses slide the vials free of the case and open them carefully. Feena's nose wrinkled.
"It smells like sugared almonds."
Julith just smiled and counted to three. She and Feena lifted the vials and drank their contents at the same moment.
A slight shimmer passed over both of them. When it faded, Julith wore Feena's face and long red hair spilled down her back. The country clothes no longer hung loose on her. Keph couldn't tell if it was just an illusion or a true transformation, but if he hadn't seen it happen, he certainly wouldn't have known the woman tucking the vial back into the silver case wasn't Feena.
Feena, however, was still herself.
She frowned and said, "Nothing happened to me."
"Nothing you can see," answered Julith. She might have looked like Feena, but the younger priestess's voice was still her own. "But until the potions wear off, only the most powerful divination magic can locate you. When Velsinore and Mifano try to find you, their magic will find me instead."
She smiled as she took Feena's vial from her and replaced it in the case, then put the case back in her satchel.
"Iraelathe's Escape—to sight
and magic, one person takes the place of another."

"What if they've already found Feena?" Keph asked. "You said they were already on their way."
"At best the trail will lead them to this field. I'll ride from here—the trail they follow will be mine and I'll lead them a merry chase." Julith gave Feena a brief hug and said, "Selune watch over you, sister."
"Selune watch over you."
Feena stepped back. Julith pressed a hand to her tired horse's heaving side and murmured a prayer. Light flickered around her hand and the horse shivered, standing tall with renewed energy. Julith swung up into her saddle.
And what, asked a small voice inside Keph, are you going to do? He swallowed, and urged his horse forward.
"I'm going with you, Julith."
Both Julith and Feena looked at him sharply.
"You don't have to do that, Keph," Feena said. "Velsinore and Mifano aren't looking for you."
"They might be," Keph said firmly. "We've been traveling together since Yhaunn. If their magic shows that, won't it look odd if we separate now?"
Julith frowned and said, "He's right."
Feena grimaced.
"All right then." She stepped up to Keph's horse and put her hand on his leg. "We'll meet again, Keph. May Selune favor you until we do."
The blessing pulled at him. He clenched his teeth against tears and gave Feena only a brisk nod of farewell. The priestess moved away.
"Keep hold of your horses," she warned—then shook herself.
Her transformation was at once both terrifying and awe-inspiring, beautiful woman flowing smoothly into powerful wolf. Keph's horse shied.back at the sudden appearance of the predator. He couldn't blame the animal. Even though he had been expecting it, the wolfs appearance struck a primal fear in him as well.
"Easy," he whispered to the horse, "easy." He might as well

have been whispering to himself.
Feena gave one sharp yip, caught the strap around Julith's gray bundle in her mouth, then turned and surged off through the grain, across the field and back toward Yhaunn.
Julith looked to Keph and said, "This is your last chance. If you want to go your own way, I won't tell Feena."
Keph shook his head. "I've run away once tonight. I think that's enough."
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Wolf legs devoured ground. Muscles bunched and stretched, driving her across the countryside parallel to the Ordulin road. Feena ran as she had seldom run before, not out of joy or fear, but out of pure desperation.
Hedgerows flashed past. All of the small creatures that she had heard from the road, she smelled as she passed in the fields. Where they had rustled with the passing of humans, however, they froze with the lightning-swift passing of the wolf. Feena put them out of her mind, put all thoughts out of her mind, and simply ran.
Until she heard the sound of hooves on the road. A great number of hooves. She froze immediately and crouched down behind the hedgerow. A tiny gap in the tightly woven branches gave her a view onto a short section of the road beyond. The sound of hooves drew closer and closer, growing to thunderous volume.
And suddenly her view of the road was filled with riders. Feena caught a brief glimpse of Velsinore and Mifano in the lead, both of them following a flickering blue ball of crackling energy. Other riders followed them: half a dozen, a full dozen ... twenty, easily. Feena drew back her lips. Velsinore and Mifano must have emptied Moonshadow Hall to carry out their pursuit. There couldn't have been more than novices, untested acolytes, and a scant handful of old priestesses left in the temple.
Moonlight shone bright around the entire party, strong enough to cast shadows beyond the hedgerows.

More than that, the hooves of the galloping horses shimmered silver when they touched the ground. Some magic sustained the animals, lending them speed and strength. Feena spared a prayer for Julith and Keph. Their lead over their pursuers wouldn't last for long.

As abruptly as they had appeared, the riders were gone, past her hiding spot and on down the road. Feena leaped back to her feet and resumed her pace. How much farther? How long had she and Keph walked? How long had they sat and talked?

The eastern horizon was purple-gray when the crops in the fields thinned and vanished. The walls of Yhaunn rose ahead. Out on the road, farmers and merchants were already beginning to move in and out of the city gates. Feena didn't bother looking for a particularly sheltered place to change. She made her transformation crouched in the shadow of a bush, hastily donning the bundled robe Julith had given her. The robe had a cowl. She pulled it up.

Grat and his partner were still on duty, though it seemed they were paying less attention to the travelers passing through the gates than they were to gossiping about the night that the clergy of Moonshadow Hall had apparently gone mad. Feena kept her head down and hurried past in the shadow of a wagon piled high with casks.

Julith hadn't thought to include sandals with the robe. Feena walked barefoot through the slowly stirring streets of Yhaunn. After so long in the dark, the light of torches and lanterns seemed harsh to her eyes. She darted from shadow to shadow, moving like a thief. Her muscles ached and trembled from the long walk, followed by the long run. She yearned to find a bed or even a dark corner to curl up in.

She couldn't. Dhauna Myritar needed her.

When she came within sight of Moonshadow Hall, Feena paused and bit her lip in thought. How was she going to get back into the temple? Even with most of the clergy out following Mifano and Velsinore, Idruth

and her kitchen staff would be at work. Going over the kitchen wall was out of the question. The front gates were kept closed overnight, and though they were never locked, they would be guarded. Feena drew a sharp breath. If she had to use her magic against another acolyte, so be it.

For once, it seemed, fortune was with her. When she eased open one of the gates and peered through, she discovered the acolyte on duty—a girl even younger than Jhezzail—crouched against a wall inside. Her head was down on her chest and she was sound asleep. Feena slipped through the gate, drew it closed, and padded into the temple. The slow rhythm of the girl's breathing didn't even shift.

There was a surprise waiting within the temple, however. The thick scent of roasting meat carried through the halls along with the sound of even more kitchen activity than usual. Idruth and her staff were especially busy, as if preparing for a feast... Feena's eyes widened as she remembered what day it was: the new moon.

In the face of everything that had happened, Velsinore was carrying on with the New Moon Beneficence. Unbelievable.

At least the activity was confined to the kitchen. The rest of Moonshadow Hall was quiet and empty. Feena creeped softly through the corridors, as silent as a novice sneaking in after curfew. The infirmary lay toward the back of the temple, on the side opposite the kitchens. She reached it without seeing another person and opened the tall doors silently.

The infirmary was a disaster. Beds had been overturned and cabinets smashed. Bandages and supplies were scattered everywhere. Shattered bottles spilled from one toppled cabinet. A mineral, metallic stink rose from them. Feena breathed through her mouth trying to block out the smell.

Up above all of the devastation, the entire ceiling shone with the bright, soft light of a full moon. Feena gazed at it in wonder. What magic had Dhauna called down to conjure such a thing?

She crossed under the shining ceiling to a door in one wall—

a heavy door, crossed with iron bands and two, stout bolts on the outside. A door meant not for keeping people out, but for keeping something else in. She remembered all too well the cold grating of those bolts as they slid home.
"Mother Dhauna?" she called.
There was a little covered hatch in the center of the door, a window into the room beyond. Feena opened it carefully.
With a tremendous growl, a heavy weight crashed against the door. Narrow jaws and white teeth snapped together inches from Feena's peering eyes before falling away. She gasped and jerked back out of reflex.
She could hear the wolf as it paced back and forth on the other side of the door, and imagine it glaring up at the little window, waiting for another chance to strike. She set her jaw and stepped up once more.
The wolf leaped at the door again, but Feena didn't flinch back. When the wolf fell away, she peered through the window. The room beyond was small, barely big enough for a large animal to take three strides from wall to wall. When she had been at Moonshadow Hall, it had been dark and empty. Since then, it had been filled with shelves of clean linens. Under the light of the moonglow that extended inside, however, Feena could see that the shelves had been broken and the linens shredded. The foul pungency of urine wafted through the open window.
The wolf that was Dhauna Myritar circled through the torn, stinking cloth, then charged the door once more. Her body slammed into the wood and iron, her claws scratching as if she could climb it. She propped herself up against the door, and leaned there, snarling and snapping, the tip of her muzzle just below the window. Feena stood on her toes and looked down. The wolfs muzzle was heavily frosted with gray and white. Her teeth, when she bared them, were worn and dull. Feena waited. Eventually, Dhauna sagged down from the door and stalked away.
Her muzzle wasn't the only part of her that showed her age.

Dhauna's gait was awkward, as if her back and hips were stiff. She was small as well, and her legs and chest were thin and frail. She limped badly, one foreleg clearly injured. Blood spotted her fur and stained some of the torn linens. Her tail dragged low behind her.

"With Selune's blessing," the elderly high priestess had said, "I will be stronger, more vital—the Moonmaiden's arm!"

Feena tore her gaze away from the window. Dhauna's mad expectations of the transformation had failed her. Feena didn't think she had ever seen an older wolf.

Steeling herself, she peered through the window once more. The moonlight wasn't doing Dhauna any good. She touched her medallion.

"In Selune's name," Feena prayed, "let this magic be ended."

Throughout the infirmary, the light flickered and faded, leaving only a few of the cool crystal lights that illuminated the corridors of Moonshadow Hall behind. Dhauna spun around in a circle, howling in alarm. Feena waited. On the night of a true full moon, it wouldn't be so easy to put an end to the transformation, but removing the magical light would be enough for the moment.

At least it should have been enough. Dhauna stopped howling and eased down into a crouch, staring at Feena with hot yellow eyes. But there was no change. The woman didn't emerge from the wolf.

Feena's breath hissed through her teeth, "Moonmaiden's grace, what have you done?" She raised her voice and called out, "Dhauna!"

Dhauna's ears flicked at the sound, but no more.

"Dhauna!" Feena repeated.

There was no reaction at all. Feena swallowed, then reached down and drew back the first of the bolts that secured the door.

At the sound of the screeching metal, Dhauna growled and crawled away from the door. At the sound of the second, she backed herself into a corner and crouched there, snarling.

Feena waited a long moment—then opened the door, ducked swiftly into the room, and pushed the door closed behind her. Dhauna whined and crushed herself far back into the corner. Feena stood still, giving the wolf time to get used to her presence and time for her own eyes to adjust to the dimness.

The stench in the room was overwhelming. Feena choked against it, struggling to catch her breath. Then she held out her hand silently. Dhauna stared at it then cautiously unfolded, creeping out of the corner by slow degrees.

Every movement seemed painful, as if all the years of Dhauna's human form were suddenly catching up with her as a wolf. Feena bit her lips and tried her best to hold back tears.

When the old wolf had creeped a few feet out into the room, Feena let out a low, questioning growl. Coming from her human throat, it was weak, but it got Dhauna's attention. Her ears pricked up and she shrank back for a moment, then stretched forward. Feena sank down slowly, bringing herself to the wolfs level. She growled again, then whined.

Friends? Come.

Dhauna had only been a wolf for a few hours, but on some instinctive level she must have recognized Feena's invitation. She limped forward cautiously until she was only an armslength away. Up close, Feena could see the bloody paw prints that every step left on the ripped linens. A fast glance over her shoulder revealed fresh, deep scratches marring the ironbound wood of the door— and on the stone of the room's walls. Dhauna had torn her claws and shredded her footpads in her rage and panic at being trapped.

"Dhauna?" Feena breathed. "Dhauna, let me heal you. Let me take away the pain."

One hand touched her medallion as the other reached slowly for Dhauna.

The wolfs eyes flared, and she snapped. Feena snatched her

hand away, but Dhauna didn't retreat. Growling angrily, the wolf paced around the crouching woman.
Feena froze, whining lightly, trying to calm her again. She turned to keep her eyes on the wolf. Dhauna snarled and leaped.
Feena rolled back before the attack and caught Dhauna deftly, one hand on the wolfs chest, the other under her head where her jaw met her neck. The wolf was shockingly light. Feena held her back easily as she snapped and struggled, straining to reach her captor with teeth or claws. Her back legs kicked and scratched futilely. Saliva sprayed from her jaws. Growls rolled out of her chest.
The wolf within Feena understood them all too well.
Interloper! Intruder! Kill you! Kill you kill you killyoukillyoukillkiUkill...
Yellow eyes burned with rage and hate above foaming jaws. There was nothing human left in them—except madness.
Feena's breath shuddered. Her heart wrenched inside her chest. There were ways to cure a werewolf even after the cursed individual had changed, like prayers spoken quickly by a priest of sufficient faith. But a cure required that the werewolf desire an end to her condition. When a werewolf had truly surrendered to the curse, had taken the beast into her heart____
Dhauna's madness, her pursuit of the New Moon Pact, had taken her too far.
... killkiUkiUkill kill kill.. . kill.. .
The wolfs growls faded. Dhauna's struggles weakened. The aged priestess didn't have the strength her animal form demanded of her. Feena heaved against her weight. Dhauna twisted free and scrambled away. Feena rose to a Crouch.
Had she thought she would never cry again? She could feel tears on her face.
"Dhauna, please. Don't make me—"
Dhauna's snarl was flat. Her torn claws scrabbled on shredded linens and she leaped again. Feena thrust forward

and met her in midair, hooking an arm around her thin chest and sweeping down to slam her against the floor. Bones cracked and Dhauna yelped in pain.
The bones would knit fast if given the chance. Werewolves were hard to kill. Silver weapons or magic would do it. The claws and teeth of another werewolf could inflict damage, too, but Feena couldn't bring herself to do that to Dhauna. Her bite had been what brought on this curse.
She had been fighting lycanthropes most of her life, though. There were other ways to kill a werewolf.
Pinning Dhauna's forelegs with her body, she clamped a hand around her muzzle, forcing it shut. Her other hand snatched up a wadded piece of linen and pushed it down over the wolfs nostrils.
Dhauna began to thrash almost instantly. Feena leaned hard on her, a dead weight on her twisting body. Her hands clenched tight... tighter. Dhauna's snarls and growls became desperate, frightened whines. Feena's vision blurred with tears but she didn't let go. Even when Dhauna's whines and thrashing faltered and her body went limp, she didn't let go.
Finally, Dhauna's body shifted under hers, old wolf fading into elderly woman. Feena choked—and let go. Gathering Dhauna into her arms, she held the dead priestess close and sobbed.
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The clerics of Moonshadow Hall caught them at dawn.
At first their pursuers had been nothing more than a glow of moonlight in the fields behind them. Then they had been a storm of hoofbeats. No matter what Keph and Julith tried, no matter where they fled, that storm followed. Every time Keph glanced over his shoulder, the Selunites had been a little bit closer, grim faces hunched low over their horses' shoulders. And Keph would crouch a little lower in his own saddle and urge the animal to greater speed.
They must have been halfway to Ordulin when his horse stumbled and went down. Keph landed on his side, facing

east toward the rising sun—and the approaching pursuers. His horse was somewhere close, staggering and groaning. Hooves rang and slid on the ground just out of his vision; Julith reining in her mount and coming around. Keph twisted and forced himself up onto his knees. His palms were scraped raw. Blinding pain shot through one ankle at the slightest pressure and almost sent him down again.

"Keep going!" he gasped at the priestess.

"There's no point," Julith said. She passed a hand over her face and her own features returned. "It's over. Feena's had all the time she's going to get."

Hooves thundered on the ground, and they were surrounded.

Keph didn't think he'd ever seen priests and priestess, not even Bolan and Variance, look as dangerous as the Selunites did. The silver-haired dandy and gray-robed stork—Mifano and Velsinore, Keph guessed from Feena's descriptions—who rode at their head seemed ready to spit fire. Especially when they realized who it was wearing Feena's clothes.

"Julith!" howled Mifano.

For a moment, the priest was a silhouette against the glare of dawn. Then he moved closer, staring at Keph, and the young man got a better look at his face. Keph's stomach dropped.

Beshaba's arms, he choked silently.

Mifano was the priest who had interrupted his attack on Lyraene. He should have guessed. How many silver-haired priests of Selune could there be in Yhaunn?

It looked like Mifano hadn't forgotten him either.

"Hold him!" the priest snapped. "Take his sword!"

Three of the larger Selunites jumped down and grabbed him while others crowded around, spells ready if he tried anything. All Keph could do, however, was yelp as the Selunites hauled him to his feet and pain flared in his ankle. It was broken or at the very least sprained. As he swooned, a priestess pulled Quick and his belt pouch away from him.

Velsinore urged her horse forward, stopping in front of Julith. Her eyes were narrow.
"Iraelathe's Escape?" she asked. Julith nodded, and Velsinore's face twisted in anger. "Where's Feena?"
"Well away from you," Julith answered.
"You'll be banished from Moonshadow Hall for this."
Julith sat up straighter and said, "I wouldn't stay anyway. Not with you in charge."
Velsinore sucked in her breath, but her hiss of rage wasn't nearly so loud as the gasp of surprise from the priestess who had taken Keph's pouch. She had the pouch open. In her palm lay Shar's disk.
Keph could almost feel the anger of Selune's clergy flare into hatred and disgust. Shock flashed across Julith's face as well.
"It's not what you think," Keph said, desperate.
"Selune's shining face, it's not!" One of the priests holding him twisted and smashed his elbow back into Keph's face. The blow connected with his cheekbone and sent dark blotches swimming across his vision. If the Selunites hadn't been holding him up, he would have staggered and fallen. "Filthy Sharran!"
"Aeso!" Mifano's voice cracked like a whip. Keph couldn't quite manage to focus on the face of the priest who had hit him, but he felt the man hesitate, then relax. "No one touch either of them," Mifano said loudly enough for everyone to hear. "Hate is Shar's way, not Selune's. We'll rest the horses, then start back to Moonshadow Hall—Selune will judge her fallen daughter." He turned his gaze on Keph. For all his words, his eyes held almost as much loathing as Aeso's. "The laws of Yhaunn will judge Shar's man."
Keph's tortured head throbbed.
"No," he breathed.
The laws of Yhaunn—the consequences of his attack on Lyraene—he could face that. But returning to Yhaunn would put him back within reach of the cult. His knees buckled.

The grips of the priests tightened, holding him up.
A nearby farmstead was only too happy to host the clergy of Selune, offering up cool water, bread, and fruit for the priests and priestesses, and feed for their horses— and the use of a shed to hold their prisoners. Aeso and another priest bound Keph and Julith securely, while Mifano traced a long, sprawling symbol around the doorframe. Where his fingers passed, cold silver light glowed for a moment, then faded. Once Aeso and the other priest had stepped out, he turned to glower at Keph and Julith.
"If you want a quick way to face your ultimate destinies," he said darkly, "opening this door would be it. I can't guarantee any greater mercy for traitors and Sharrans."
He walked out and closed the shed door firmly. A bolt squealed on the other side. Keph swallowed and stared across the dimness of the shed at Julith. Aeso had left them facing each other.
"Julith-"
She cut him off before he could say anymore. "Does Feena know?"
"This isn't what it looks like." "Does Feena know?"
"Yes!" Keph spat back at her. "Julith, I-"
The priestess cut him off again. Her voice was cold. "She told me you rescued her in the Stiltways. Was that some kind of trick?"
"Will you let me talk?" he snapped.
"So you can spin Shar's lies?"
His head sagged down in defeat. His face where Aeso had struck him felt swollen and strangely numb—when he spoke, a dull ache ran down to his teeth. It was a counterpoint to the growing fire in his ankle.
"No," he said. "No lies. I'm trying to get away from Shar's cult. I would have told you, but we didn't exactly have a chance to talk, did we?" He looked up. Julith's face was still angry, but her eyes were narrow. She was at least listening to him. "Believe me, Feena was just as angry when she

found out. But I want to leave Shar. I swear it. I want to get away before something terrible happens and there's no turning back. That's all."
Silence lingered between them. Keph could hear the Selunites off in the distance somewhere outside the shed. It sounded as if they were arguing among themselves. He didn't have to work very hard to guess what they were arguing about.
"Why should I believe anything you say?" asked Julith.
"You shouldn't, I suppose," said Keph. "You've got no reason. I could be lying right now. All I can say is that I'm not. I'm sorry you had to get caught with me—because of me. I probably should have left you."
"You probably should have." Julith let out a slow sigh and continued, "But it would have been a worse ride without you. If Feena could trust you, I suppose I can." She glanced up at him. "So there are Sharrans in Yhaunn after all. Velsinore and Mifano must be wetting themselves. I guess we'd all gotten a little too complacent in..."
Her voice fell away. A shudder ran down Keph's back.
There was something in the air, a strange feeling of being watched. Keph looked around the dim shed, but there was nothing to see, except scraps of tack and harness, a few old farm tools, and slow moving dust caught in the few beams of sunlight that fell through gaps in the plank walls to pierce the shadows.
Shadows.
Keph's breath caught. "No!" he choked.
The shadows deepened abruptly, as if a cloud had passed over the new-risen sun outside. The sense of being watched changed, became more intense.
The darkness folded and gathered in on itself. When it parted again, Variance was in the shed with them, a thick cloak shrouding her dusky pale form. Her hand darted out toward Julith, amethyst ring flashing as it caught a stray beam of sunlight.

"In Shar's name, be still!"
Julith stiffened, a look of surprise caught on her face. Keph gasped and drew breath, a shout of alarm already on his lips. Variance whirled and spoke a low word,
flicking her fingers at him. Shadows spun out from her gesture, and coalesced into a solid form. Keph's shout died as a chakram, the razor-edged throwing disk that was Shar's own legendary weapon, materialized out of the darkness. The weapon stopped less than an inch from his throat and hung there.
"Be silent, Keph," ordered Variance. "Did you really think you could run from us?"
Sweat broke out on Keph's forehead. He could feel it trickling from his face, down his outstretched neck. He sat back slowly. The floating chakram moved with him, maintaining its position.
"How did you find me?" he breathed. "How did you even know I'd gone?"
"Selune's clergy aren't all so faithful as the moon goddess might think," Variance said in a low voice. "Now hold your tongue!"
Her fingers twitched. The chakram slid forward and its cold edge kissed Keph's throat. Variance turned away to stand over Julith.
"Priestess of Selune," she murmured. Her voice took on a strange timbre, a haunting, seductive quality. The pupils of Julith's eyes grew wide, seeming to consume all the color of her irises. "Priestess of Selune, hear me. What you remember now is false. Let it pass from your memory. This is the truth that you will recall: that Keph Thingoleir broke free from his bonds, and that he mocked you and your faith and your foolish confidence that there could be no Sharrans in Yhaunn!"
The lie stabbed into Keph, more painful than he could have thought. He moaned against the edge of the shadowy chakram. The power flowing off Variance raised the hairs on

his skin. The dark priestess had said that Shar granted her certain powers over the minds of the weak, that Lyraene didn't recall the full truth of their duel-was this what she had done to the half-elf?
"Don't listen, Julith!" he hissed "Fight her! I wouldn't mock you!"
But Variance's murmur was relentless. And cruel.
"He fooled you, priestess! Keph Thingoleir is more than he seems. He enspeUed you! Beloved of Shar, he commands the darkest of forces. He tore open the shadows themselves to make his escape. And before he fled, he swore his vengeance against Moonshadow Hall. At the moment of Selune's weakness, Shar will lay your temple waste—he promises it! Know fear, priestess, for Shar shall come!"
Her hands floated through the air, fingertips settling briefly against Julith's forehead. The pitch of her voice turned harsh and commanding.
"By the power of the Mistress of Night, this is the memory I make for you!"
A shadow slid across Julith's eyes.
Keph's heart felt as if it had stopped. Variance drew a slow breath and lifted her hands away from the priestess, then turned back to him.
"So," she said, her gaze as cold and as hard as her voice. "You disappoint me."
"Variance..." Keph gulped.
"Be silent!" Variance snarled again.
She reached down and clenched his hair in one fist. Keph gasped, then gasped again as a cold force wrenched him into swirling shadows.
"Julith!" he shrieked. The priestess's gaze didn't even flicker. "Jul-"
Darkness closed around him, choking his scream into silence.

## CHAPTER 13

It was time to go. The sun would be rising. Moonshadow Hall

would be stirring. Did Selune's faithful need to know what had happened in that cramped little room? The last dark depths of the High Moonmistress's madness?

Feena eased Dhauna's frail body out of her embrace and laid her on the torn linens that covered the floor, turning her on her side and drawing her cooling limbs up into a childlike huddle. She clenched her teeth as she stood Dhauna's body told the comforting lie of a peaceful death, a mercy to ease the mourning of the faithful.

The truth would be a terrible, secret burden for her to carry alone.

Feena bolted the iron-banded door behind herself. It was reasonable to assume the spell oi moonlight that had lit the infirmary had ended with Dhauna's death. There would be no reason for anyone to guess she had been back to Moonshadow Hall.

Outside the infirmary, she paused. The sounds of a new day were drifting through the halls of the temple. She might still be able to slip out before too many of the remaining priestess and acolytes were up and about. Against the savory scents of Idruth's kitchen, however, she was suddenly aware of the foul smell that clung to her robe. She stank of urine and death. There would be a fresh robe in her former chamber, but in the extra minutes it would take her to retrieve it, there was also a greater chance of getting caught.

Her fists clenched with a sudden need to be rid of the tainted garment.

She turned and darted down a dark corridor. The mossy pillar in the kitchen garden wasn't the only secret she remembered from her playful days as a novice and an acolyte. Exploring Moonshadow Hall's unused passages and dusty storerooms was a rite for every child entering the temple. Beyond the infirmary, a steep, narrow ramp led up to the second floor and a series of dim rooms that smelled of mice. Beyond those rooms was an abandoned library, walls

lined with empty shelves. Beyond that was a long, curved passage with dust so thick on the floor it held the footprints of countless novices—and one stealthy priestess. Feena walked quickly, the hem of her robe stirring up little clouds of dust in her wake. At the end of the curved passage was a narrow door. Feena thrust against it. Hinges squealed.

She stepped out beneath the ramp leading up to the archives. Leaving the narrow door ajar, she trotted past the ramp and peered down the long corridor that connected the clergy's quarters. The morning sounds of the novices' and acolytes' dormitories echoed from its distant end.

Just ahead, sunlight burned a bright path across the dim corridor.

Feena trotted up to Dhauna's chambers and peered inside. The broken door remained where Mifano had left it, leaning against a wall. Someone had pulled open the heavy curtains that hung over the big window, though. Morning light streamed in. On Dhauna's desk, the ancient tome that recorded the fall of the New Moon Pact shone in the sunlight, white leather gleaming like a lie. Feena looked away and darted past.

Her former chamber was only a short way along the corridor. Its door stood open as well, though the curtains remained drawn. The torn strips she had used to bind Jhezzail were scattered on the floor. Feena stripped off her fouled robe and kicked it under the bed, then opened the wardrobe. A clean robe hung inside—right next to the silver-embroidered gown she had worn to Ammanas Aumleagarr's garden party. She brushed the moon-pale silk regretfully before tearing her hand away. Swiftly donning the robe, she stepped back into the corridor and ran for the ramp that led down to the temple's ground floor.

A shadow fell across it from below. Someone was coming up.

Feena pulled away quickly. Could she hide in her chamber? No. With the door open, anyone passing could see inside—and soon the novices and acolytes would be pouring past on

their way to breakfast. Closing a door that had stood open all night would only draw attention.
But there was a chamber nearby that had been deliberately placed so that no one passed it. Feena scrambled silently back down the corridor and ducked into the brilliance of Dhauna's chamber. Holding her breath, she strained her ears to catch the steps of whoever was climbing—
The wail that tore across the courtyard outside struck her like a blow.
"She's dead! Mother Dhauna is dead!"
Someone had visited the infirmary. For a heartbeat there was silence, then chaos erupted as the news spread Feena could hear shouts and screams from the dormitories, cries and exclamations from the few priestesses who had remained in the temple. She could imagine the confusion amid the heat of the kitchens—the New Moon Beneficence would suddenly become a funeral feast. For a moment, all of her own grief threatened to come crashing back yet again. Memories of Mother Dhauna in better times, wise and gentle before madness claimed her...
Feena squeezed her eyes shut and sagged back against a wall.
"No," she snarled under her breath. "Enough." No more tears. Not now.
She reached up and clenched her hand around Selune's medallion, gripping it so hard that the edges of the holy symbol bit into her flesh.
Bright Lady of Night, she prayed in silent anger, how could you let this happen to someone who loved you?
Her arm tensed. The chain of the medallion strained against her neck. One tug would tear the holy symbol free…
She forced her hand open and let it fall back to her side. Rejecting Selune wouldn't change what had happened. She opened her eyes. Her gaze fell on the white book on Dhauna's desk.
Was that how the New Moon Pact had felt as their sisters and

brothers turned on them? Had they questioned Selune, too?
Out in the courtyard, chaos was giving way to order as elder clergy took charge of the situation. Feena couldn't hear running or shouting anymore, but her chance to slip out of Moonshadow Hall unnoticed had passed. Whoever stood sentry at the gate would be alert. She would need to find a place to hide and wait for the right time to make her escape.
She forced herself away from the wall and started to turn to the door—then stopped and turned back to the white book.
One good thing had come of Dhauna's madness, hadn't it? The New Moon Pact, condemned by jealousy and lost for centuries, had been rediscovered. Feena lifted her chin, stepped forward, and scooped up the massive tome.
If nothing else, she was going to have time to read.
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By our authority in assembly, these are the heretics who shall face Selune's own judgment:
Tyver Thomdrove, called the Peacemaker, of Berdusk.
Niree Swifthands of Elmwood.
Brant Hallower of Candlekeep.
Qualise Domo of Turmish.
Rode of the Farsea Marches (died in capture).
Enshu Venerun ofChondath (died in capture).
By our authority, a bounty is also placed on any servants and close associates of them, and on the wolf called Halftail, companion of Niree Swifthands. They are cast out of Selune's grace in body and in soul. May Selune's face turn away so that their souls walk in darkness until the end of time.
---
Feena's head jerked. She blinked sleep from her eyes, sat back, and stretched. A night spent walking and running without rest was trying hard to catch up with her and her chosen hiding place wasn't helping. Moonshadow Hall's archives had seemed like an ideal refuge: all but abandoned, no windows to give away the small magical light

she conjured, a table and chair at which to read, easy concealment among the tall shelves in case someone should happen to come by....

Then again, there was a reason no one came to the archives, wasn't there? She had to fight against the muffling quiet just to keep herself alert, and with no windows there was also no way of marking the passage of time.

She stared down at the list of the names again—the last members of the New Moon Pact. More than anything else in the great white book, those names called to her. Not that there was much else in it that had more than the faintest ring of truth. The pact had been tried by people who disdained them. Great deeds, hallowed traditions... those hadn't been important in the face of charges of foul heresy.

Selune's priests and priestesses and done more than suppress the New Moon Pact six hundred years ago. They had killed its history. Their own history. Feena clenched her teeth. There had to be something, some additional scrap of legend. She turned a page and bent back to the book.

Something shifted in the shadows.

She froze, watching the darkness, but nothing moved.

But there had been something. Feena rose slowly, her heart beating faster. Her lips pulled back from her teeth One hand sought the paperweight she had cast her light onto. She lifted it and waited.

When the shadows shifted again, she hurled it.

Illumination streaked across bookshelves and scroll racks, sliced through shadows—but revealed nothing. The glowing paperweight arced across empty space until it hit a wall and bounced to the floor. Crack. Clatter. Rrrollll...

For a moment, the archives were silent again. Then sound tickled Feena's ear, a sound that grew and condensed like mist on leaves. Whispers. She could almost make out words —almost, but not quite. And behind the words was some force—something dark and alive-something ancient. The hair on her neck rose.

I know this, Feena realized. Moonmaiden's grace, this is Dhauna's dream!
The light of the paperweight vanished like a torch plunged into water. She hurled herself to the side out of instinct and felt a cold breeze as the sound of whispers rushed past. She gasped, shaken. If it was a dream, it was like nothing she'd ever felt before.
"Wake up, Feena," she told herself. "Wake up!"
Nothing happened.
In the darkness, whispers surged like waves on the sea. Dhauna had described feeling as if the whispers were going to overcome her, that whatever ancient force lurked behind them would consume her. The whispers shivered through Feena, tugging on her body and her spirit. Fear wrenched her heart.
The shadows shifted again. Feena dodged once more.
Whispers whirled and tore at her. If the force behind them expected her to flee as Dhauna had, though, it was wrong.
Feena came to her feet howling with a wolfs voice.
It had to be a dream. Her human form flowed into her hybrid wolf-woman shape with barely a thought. She leaped into the darkness, tearing at it ferociously. Her claws shredded through the shadow. Feena tumbled free and snarled triumphantly. For a moment, the whispers stretched thin, like strained voices—then rushed back in a thunderous roar.
Feena's snarl died. She threw herself away but the dark thunder slammed into a bookcase behind her. The shelf exploded into splinters and tatters of paper. Flying wood pierced her like a tiny arrows, spattering pain against her hide. Feena yelped in sudden alarm. The force—whatever it might have been—was too powerful. She couldn't fight it face to face. She needed to get away.
A growl answered her unspoken need: Here!
She twisted. A long gray tail was just vanishing into the archive's maze of shelves. A wolfs tail!
Feena hesitated for a heartbeat, then scrambled after it.

Behind her, the roaring darkness lashed at the floor where she had stood, gouging long strips out of it.
The moment she plunged in among the stacks, though, the roar seemed to sweep away into the distance. A glance over her shoulder showed what seemed like a corridor of books stretching out behind her until it twisted around a corner. How had she moved so far? She looked back around. The tail she had glimpsed was gone again and not even her wolfs nose could sniff out anything more than dust and crumbling parchment. Had she imagined the other wolf? The whispers were building again, growing in volume as if the dark force had plunged into the maze after her. If it caught her....
She whined desperately, Help!
Here!
She moved forward. Growls guided her through turns and at intersection with other book-lined corridors.
Here! Here!
She followed, though she saw nothing. She had to run to keep up—at least until the same flowing transformation as before caught her a second time. Suddenly she was a wolf, loping along easily on four legs.
But as she dashed past one intersection, the whispers surged and shadows boiled out. The darkness had found her. Feena half-turned, ready to meet it, but before she could, a form flashed past her—another wolf, but one as black as the night itself.
It vanished down the cross-corridor. The wolf-voice guiding her gave a short, commanding bark: Keep moving!
Feena moved on. The whispers faded again and after a moment Feena realized that even if she couldn't see or smell the wolf guiding her, she could hear it. Nails clicked in rapid rhythm ahead of her—and behind her! Two sets behind her, in fact. Feena twisted her neck to look past her flanks. Two wolves were pacing after her, one light gray and lean, the other white and heavier, with the bright eyes of a young animal.

Her racing heart stuttered. She had never seen these wolves before, yet she knew their names:
Niree Swifthands.
Brant Hallower.
The black wolf that had defended her: Rade.
The voice that called her, the gray tail she'd first glimpsed, was Tyver the Peacemaker.
It was the last of the New Moon Pact, She stumbled, and Niree darted forward and nipped at her legs. Feena jumped forward. The corridor gave one last twist and opened up.
She was back at the reading table. The moon glow of the paperweight had returned, though, and the paperweight itself was sitting on the table once more. The gouged floor and the shattered bookshelf had been restored. Everything was exactly the way it had been.
Except that two women—Enshu Venerun and Qualise Domo, she knew intuitively—and a man stood waiting for her by the table. Feena slid to a sharp stop, her paws scrabbling against the floor. The man, Tyver in his human form, crouched down to face her. He took her hand—abruptly she was human again—and helped her stand. His grip was cold but firm.
"Have faith and be strong, Feena Archwood," he said, "for Selune is with you."
Feena gasped with sudden certainty. "Dhauna's dreams—they were real! They were warnings!"
"They are real," said Qualise. "They're your dreams now, High Moonmistress."
"I'm not—" Feena began to protest, but her voice froze. The rite had been performed. Dhauna had named her successor—and with her death, the mantle of leadership passed on.
Feena swallowed and said, "Moonmaiden grant me strength."
"The strength is in you," said Qualise. "Understand that and you understand much."
She stepped aside so that Feena could see the table. The

great white book that detailed the pact's trial was gone. In its place was another, slim and elegant instead of bloated and thick. Feena stared at it in wonder. The new book was bound in fine black leather with Selune's phases set in silver down the center of the cover. Where other representations of the phases began with a crescent and grew through half and gibbous to the full moon's bright disk before returning to a crescent, the black book turned that order inside out. On its cover, the full moon shone at the top, shrinking to gibbous, then to the half moon, then to a crescent. In the center of the cover, a hair-thin ring of silver made an empty circle—the new moon.

Somewhere close, the tide of whispers was growing again. She twisted around. Rade had joined Niree and Brant. All three wolves faced outward, a growling wall of fangs and muscle. Feena spun back to the other members of the vanished pact.

"What is the darkness?" she asked. "Was Dhauna right? Is it heresy? Does Selune really want the New Moon Pact reborn to fight heresy in her faith?"

"Yes and no," said Tyver. "No and yes," said Qualise.

"All things come," said Enshu, "in their proper time." Feena looked at her. She was a stout woman with a strong face crossed by a scar. She reached out thick hands and drew Feena forward, guiding her to the chair beside the table. "Dhauna Myritar tried to move too fast. Now your time is too short."

"I don't understand," Feena gasped.

The whispers pressed in on all sides. The New Moon Pact was pulling together to make a circle around her. A look of urgency crossed Enshu's face.

"Some things should never be understood," she snarled—and shoved Feena hard back into the chair.

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Feena woke to voices. Real voices.

All thought of the dream vanished. Someone was at the door

of the archives. No—more than just someone. Feena caught sour tones. It was Velsinore.

The clergy of Moonshadow Hall had returned. How long had she been asleep? Feena stifled a curse and touched the paperweight, dismissing its glow with a thought. The white book was still on the table, just as it should have been. Feena flipped it closed, then scrambled out of her chair and flung herself silently in among the shelves, sliding deep into their maze. When Velsinore's voice became more than a whisper, Feena stopped and pressed herself down against the floor. The robe billowed loosely around her—loose enough to accept a change in form. Narrowing her eyes in concentration, Feena shifted and became a wolf. Sharp ears twitched, listening.

Out in the center of the chamber, Velsinore spoke a prayer and light blossomed.

"Gather them all, sisters!" the tall priestess commanded. "They'll go in the vaults with the others."

Priestesses murmured, and Feena caught the slither of parchment on parchment. They were gathering the scrolls and books Dhauna had left laid out on the table. Someone grunted under a weight. The white book! However flawed the account might be, it was the only record of the New Moon Pact. Feena's ears pressed back and a low growl escaped her.

One of the priestesses gasped in alarm and parchment crackled sharply.

"Velsinore!"

Feena tensed in alarm, but Velsinore only grunted, angry. "Be careful, Chandri! It might be something among them that drove Dhauna and Julith to madness." She grunted again, and said, "Perhaps it's time these archives were purged."

"Velsinore," asked one of the other priestesses timidly, "what will happen to Julith now?"

"Selune will judge her, Tam." Velsinore's voice was calm. Her

footsteps retreated. "After the funeral, when the moon is waxing again—Selune will judge her."
"What about what the Sharran told her?" bleated Chandri.
Velsinore's footsteps stopped.
For a moment there was silence, then Velsinore said, "Attend to your work, sisters. When Selune waxes, we'll put an end to the Sharran and his kind. Now hurry— there's a lot to do."
Her footsteps began again, marching out of the archives. Other footsteps scurried in her wake. After a moment, the archives were silent once more, though Velsinore's light remained.
Feena put her jaw down on her paws and allowed herself a thin growl. Obviously Julith and presumably Keph along with her had been captured, but she wondered what the young man could have said to put Tam and Chandri into such a state of alarm. She whined and slapped her tail on the floor. She needed to get out of the archives and find out what was going on. Feena started rise, to change back into a woman.
Silver flashed in the corner of her eye.
Feena sank back down and peered in at the lowest level of the shelves she crouched beside. Back behind dusty, cracked scrolls—there was something there. Something that shone with silver, but that only a wolfs sharp eyes might see and even then only if the animal was stretched out on the ground. Feena made her transformation, then knelt down again and reached blindly past the scrolls. Her fingers closed on a slim book, its leather binding furred and soft with age. She pulled it out carefully.
The book's cover was black. The silver that decorated it was dull and mostly tarnished, but the hair-thin ring that stood in the center of the cover was still somehow bright.
"Moonmaiden's grace," Feena breathed.
She rose and moved out into the light. Drawing a shallow breath, she opened the cover of the book. Leather that should have crumbled held firm. There was magic at work.
Cramped, heavy script filled the first page. The book bore no

title, but it began with a date: Feast of the Moon, the Year of Lost Wayfarers. Feena bit her lip. That was five months after the suppression of the New Moon Pact. Eyes wide, she read:
Feast of the Moon, the Year of Lost Wayfarers. To the one who comes—
Hear the tale of the New Moon Pact, destroyed by lies. In Selune's name and by her grace, I make this record. All around me, the tales of the Pact are wiped away day by day. My pack is gone, but by Selune's hand I survive. By her will, I carry its ancient history in my heart. On this day dedicated to the honored dead, I begin my secret record. Bright Lady of Night, grant me the years to finish it.
The priestesses of Moonshadow Hall know me as Asha the Silent. Six months ago, I had a different name and a different form. Until Selune laid her hand upon me, my name was Halftail and I was a wolf.
When the time is right, I pray that you read what Selune granted me human hands and mind to record. I pray that you
restore the name and lore of the New Moon Pact, charged by Selune in the earliest nights of the world to watch and defend against the darkest shadows. What time has consumed, not even gods can recall, but know this—these words were spoken by those who first made pact with the Moonmaiden, just as they were spoken by the last. This is the sacred rite of the New Moon.
Feena closed the book and squeezed her eyes shut. Her dream... the New Moon Pact...
"Oh, Dhauna," Feena murmured. "Bright Lady of the Night, have pity on a tortured spirit."

## CHAPTER 14

The shadows seemed to go on forever, bleak and black. Cold, their touch was like a dark sea fog rolling across Keph's body and spirit. Variance was gone. He was alone—and helpless. There was nothing he could do but... drift...
Sound came back to him first.

"The call went out at dusk as you instructed, Mother Night," Bolan's voice said. "The faithful are assembling now. They will bring weapons."
"Good," replied Variance. "Go make what preparations you need to for yourself."
"I've been preparing for this for years, Mother Night." Bolan sounded like he might actually cry. Keph could hardly imagine tears breaking out on that cold white face. "I have a chest filled with formulas I thought I might never use. The poison Cyrume took was the least of what waits for the Selunites."
Smell... Recognition of an odor that had been
in his nose for some time filtered into Keph's consciousness: raw, cold stone. He was in the cliff tunnels. In Shar's temple. His heart clenched and his eyes opened.
Darkness weighed upon the air. The only light was a dim glow, a single candle that burned on the other side of the temple. Against it, Bolan and Variance were silhouettes, the alchemist squat and nightmarish, the Calishite woman tall and stiff. Her arm reached out and came down on Bolan's wide shoulder.
"This is the time we have been waiting for. This is what the Temple of Old Night sent me to Yhaunn to oversee. The Selunites' attempt to steal Keph from us was only the final blow."
Keph caught his breath at the lie. What—?
Bolan hissed in righteous anger. "Moonshadow Hall will crumble!" He stepped away and bowed low, the candlelight shifting with his movements. "We will do honor to Shar tonight."
"I do hot doubt it," said Variance. "Now, go. I have preparations of my own to make."
Bolan bowed again and the light bounced—then dimmed and faded as the squat man trotted away. Keph almost gasped and called out after him: Leave the candle, Bolan, please!

The words faltered in his throat. Darkness, utter darkness, cloaked Shar's temple.
"You're finally awake."
Variance's voice—far kinder than the last time she had spoken to him—emerged from the shadows. Her footsteps approached across the raw stone of the floor, as sure as if she walked through the brilliance of daylight. Keph flinched away. For the first time, he realized that he was stretched out on wood, maybe a broad bench. His arms and legs were untied. He sat up, and the movement brought pain. Fire shot through his ankle and across his face where the priest Aeso had struck him. He gasped and fell back.
"Be still."
A hand touched him. He tried to pull away, but
Variance pressed him down against the wood with shocking strength.
"By the glory of Shar, be healed."
The agony that surged through him was almost worse than his injuries. Keph jerked and spasmed, his head cracking back hard. The false brightness of pain exploded across his vision—but when it cleared, the ache in his ankle was gone and his face felt no more than tender. Variance lifted her hand away.
Keph gulped air and sat up, trembling with relief. He stared blindly into the darkness. She'd healed him. Why?
Variance gave a soft laugh and said, "Do you think that just because you're blind, I am as well? I see confusion on your face, Keph. You have questions. Ask them." He heard liquid pour. Variance put a metal cup into his hand. "Water," she said. "Nothing more."
He didn't move. After a moment, Variance released him and stood up. He heard a rustle of clothing and footsteps as she moved away, then returned. A tindertwig scratched on stone and flared bright as Variance lit a candle.
"Light, Keph," she said, holding the candle out to him.
"You were angry," he rasped. Fear made a hard lump in his

stomach.
"Of course I was angry," Variance said calmly. "I was worried. When Bolan told me that the Selunites had captured you, I feared for you. Praise Shar, I was able to reach you before they could start their torture. The werewolves among them —"
"Torture?"
The Selunites hadn't been going to torture him. And werewolves? The only werewolf among the Selunites of Moonshadow Hall was Feena, and she had been long gone when he and Julith had been captured.
Julith... He remembered the young priestess staring as Variance...
Keph blinked Variance's voice was inside his head, seductive and haunting, weaving lies among his memories.
The cup fell from his hand to splash water across wood and stone as he thrust himself backward, away from the pale woman. If Quick had been at his side, Keph would have drawn her—but the Selunites still had the blade.
"Stop it!" he gasped at Variance.
She narrowed her eyes. Her voice surged back, harsher than before. "I brought you to safety..."
Keph clenched his teeth and pushed back against the whispers, straining with all the strength of his will.
"No!" he shouted.
The force of the denial was shocking, like a slap in the face. In an instant his head was clear and Variance's eyes were hard in the candlelight. Breathing hard, his heart pounding, Keph tensed and met her gaze.
"Stay out of my head!" he snarled.
Variance pressed her lips together. For a moment, she was silent, then she whispered, "My words come back to haunt me. I did say you had remarkable strength of will, didn't I?" She shrugged. "Very well. Keep your memories."
Keph's breath caught in his throat. He gaped at the priestess.

"You-"
"—admit surrender?" Variance's eyebrows rose. "Why shouldn't I?"
Silence dropped. It was all Keph could do to stare. She was giving up? The priestess whose disdain had once made him grovel, the woman who spoke for the Lady of Loss, was admitting defeat? Suddenly, his rage was gone, stolen out from under him so quickly that his head spun in confusion. The fear that had driven him to flee Yhaunn, the sense of purpose he had found in helping Feena... they were gone as well. If Variance was just giving up, what was there to be afraid of? Off balance, he groped desperately for something to help make sense of what was happening.
"This is some kind of trick," he said, taking another step away from her.
Variance gave him a measured look and asked, "How is it a trick?"
He struggled for an answer. "You... you lied to Bolan. You told him the Selunites tried to steal me away. You know that's not what happened."
"You want me to tell Bolan the truth?" She opened her free hand as if releasing some captured insect. "That your faith failed? That you tried to flee? That you fell in with Selunites? That I dragged you back through Shadow by the hair on your head? What purpose would there be in telling Bolan that? He would strike you down on the spot. But so long as he believes the Selunites snatched you away, you're Shar's hero. If I had convinced you of the same thing, no one would have known any different."
"But you didn't convince me."
"No, I didn't," Variance agreed. "I might have, though. . If plans never succeed, why bother making them at all? But I serve the Lady of Loss. One of her harshest lessons is learning to recognize when a plan has failed and there's no hope of taking it any farther." She turned away and began walking across the temple. "It's clear that you've turned

away from Shar. Drawing you back isn't worth the effort."
Keph stopped, his feet heavy, his heart in his throat. "You're... you're letting me go?"
"If I wanted to harm you, I could do it easily enough." She glanced back at him and said, "Come with me unless you want to stand in the dark."
It wasn't an answer to his question, but he hesitated, then followed her.
"You and Jarull," he said, "you've been manipulating me."
"More or less," Variance replied. On the far side of the temple, she turned down a curving tunnel. "It's regrettable that you fell in with the Selunites. I'd be curious to know how that happened."
"It was coincidence."
Variance said, "You'll find there's no coincidence where gods take a hand, Keph."
"Maybe ... maybe Selune is giving me a chance to redeem myself."
"Or perhaps Shar chose to show me that your faith was weak." She paused and turned to look at him. Her face was placid, but cold. "The Mistress of the Night could have given you many rewards, Keph. I spoke no lie when I said you had the potential to become one of Shar's priests. It would have been best for both of us if your faith had been stronger—or if your will had been weaker."
"It's a good thing Shar teaches you loss then, isn't it?" Keph said.
"Shar teaches the anticipation of loss," answered Variance. "Even if I prefer to expect that my plans will succeed, I prepare for the possibility of failure."
She raised the candle. Stone walls shone with slowly trickling water and slick mineral deposits—then ended abruptly in darkness. Just beyond Variance's reach lay a shadow that seemed to consume the candle's feeble glow, resisting its light. Variance held out her hand and spoke a prayer under her breath. Like mist before a wind, the shadow

parted.
Keph stared.
Chained like a dog to the stone floor, Jarull jerked back from the sudden light, covering his eyes and howling in agony— then clapping his hands to his ears as if the sound of his own voice were painful. Howls dropped into moans and the big man swung his head back and forth like an animal driven to madness.
With the parting of the shadow, the stench of excrement filled the tunnel as well. The pants that Jarull wore were stained and horribly crusted. His skin was pale, his tall frame gaunt, and his hair, a tangled nest. The fingers that cupped his ears were torn and bloody. When his open mouth swung into the light, Keph could see that his tongue was raw and red as well. The rock walls within reach of the chain had been rubbed clean of mineral deposits. Jarull had been licking the stone for water.
- It was as if his friend had been chained there for days— for tendays. But that wasn't possible. He'd seen Jarull practically every day—
But Jarull's mother hadn't. Wasn't that what Strasus had said? And Strasus and Dagnalla hadn't been able to locate Jarull with magic.
The chained man wore no amethyst ring. Keph raised his head and stared at Variance. The dark priestess had her hands crossed, but the purple gem of her ring winked between her fingers. Keph clenched his teeth.
"How long has he been here?" he asked.
"Only a little more than two tendays," said Variance. She might have been discussing apples in a barrel for all the emotion in her voice. "But it probably seems much longer to him. The Lady of Loss is a harsh jailer."
"Then it was you all along. You took his place to draw me into the cult."
Variance just turned away and began walking back to the temple. Keph swung between her and Jarull. As the

candlelight faded, the chained man's moans eased. His mad swinging turned into a gentle rocking. Keph took a step toward him, reaching out his hand.
"Jarull..."
His friend looked up. Bruised eyes widened—and he shrieked, scrambling away to press himself frantically against the wall.
Variance's voice floated back down the tunnel, "Come away from him, Keph."
Keph whirled toward her. "What have you done to him?"
"I haven't done anything. Come away."
The candlelight moved on. Clenching his teeth, Keph stumbled through the darkness after it. Variance waited for him at the entrance to the tunnel.
"Why?" he snarled at her.
"Motivation," she said calmly, "in case your loyalty proved less than I expected."
The elation he had felt, believing he had cast an orison, the joy he'd felt when Variance welcomed him back into Shar's grace after his encounter with Lyraene ... "Ask me anything, Variance," he had said, "and I would do it. That's the debt I owe you."
He closed his eyes. He had been dancing to Variance's manipulations like a marionette on strings.
"What do you want?" he asked her.
He half-expected her to smile in triumph, but she didn't.
"Strasus Thingoleir has in his possession a collection of ancient artifacts recovered from the tunnels of Yhaunn a month ago." Variance's words were blunt, the instructions of someone who expected to be obeyed. "Among them is a set of black slate tiles hinged together like a book and inscribed with silver characters that defy translation. I want those tiles."
Keph stared at her. "How did you know about—?" He cut himself off. "Beshaba's arms. They were your goal all along. You've used me from the very beginning."

"Not the very beginning," Variance said. "It took me at least a tenday to identify you as the weakness in your father's House."
The weakness... Keph bit his tongue against a bitter laugh. So that's what he was.
"Well, this weakness isn't going to be enough for you," he told her. "My father has those tiles in his study. No one can get past the wards on it."
"You can," said Variance. "Just as you were able to place the magesbane in your brother's laboratory. Child of a doting, hopeful parent, the wards of Fourstaves House part for you."
Keph's eyes narrowed and Variance smiled. "Did you really think the dust was just a whim? It was a test. You told Jarull about the wards and with some persuasion, Jarull told me. I had to be sure that it was true. Your misuse of the dust was a pleasant surprise. Perhaps Shar guided you."
"My father's study isn't my brother's laboratory. It's better protected."
"I have no doubt it is." Her voice hardened. "Retrieve the tiles and Jarull will go free. A simple exchange."
His hands curled into fists. "What if I can't get them?"
"Jarull will remain Shar's prisoner and I'll find another way to get the tiles."
Variance moved to one of the braziers that stood around the temple and lifted the lid. The smell of cold charcoal drifted out. A thin scrap of kindling lay beside the brazier. The dark priestess held it in the flame of the candle until it caught fire, then thrust it among the charcoal. She turned back to him. "I have no interest in seeing you fail, of course. I will provide a distraction to cover your theft."
"A distraction?" The thought chilled him. "What kind of distraction?"
"Mother Night?" Bolan's voice echoed from a tunnel. "Full dark has fallen. The faithful are assembled."
Breath hissed between Keph's teeth. "An attack—"
Variance's hand snapped up, holding him to silence.

"Summon them to worship, Brother Night," she called back. "They will receive Shar's blessing before battle."
Keph caught the sound of Bolan's footsteps retreating up the tunnel. He looked at Variance, and she returned his gaze.
"Yes," she said. "An attack on Moonshadow Hall. The age old rivalry of Shar and Selune is brought into the open once more."
Keph's mouth gaped open for a moment before he swallowed and said, "But the memory you forced on Julith—you made her think I promised an attack. The Selunites will be expecting this. It's going to be a massacre."
"No, it would be a massacre if the Selunites were caught unprepared," said Variance. "Do you really want the distraction to be over so quickly? Don't think Shar's faithful so easily brought low. You know what they're capable of. Stand with me during the ceremony, Keph. The others need to see you."
"You want me to help you?"
Variance tilted her head and replied, "If Shar's faithful aren't properly prepared, the distraction will fail. Your supposed capture is the key to their inspiration. You need to be seen—and you need to be seen praising Shar."
Rage and disgust swept over Keph—rage at Variance for manipulating him yet again, disgust at himself for allowing it.
"Do you have a plan for everything?" he spat. He felt like an angry child and just as helpless. Variance turned away.
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Moonshadow Hall was in chaos.
Feena stole through the corridors of the temple, trying to stay unseen and out of the way. It wasn't easy. Any normal order she could have predicted seemed to have been erased. She had emerged from the archives to discover that the sun had set—her exhausted dreaming had carried through the entire afternoon and much of the evening. Any other night, Moonshadow Hall would be worshiping the

moonrise. On a normal new moon night, Selune's faithful would be gathered in the refectory, celebrating Dhauna's New Moon Beneficence. But instead clergy, acolytes, and novices were everywhere. Some were clearly preparing for Dhauna's funeral. Billowing white drapes were being hung. White wax candles laced with silver dust were being set out. From the temple's mortuary came the sound of mourning chants as Dhauna's body was washed and prepared for burial.

But at the same time, other clerics roamed the corridors like dogs. They always moved in pairs at the very least, and all of them carried maces—most leaving the weapons hanging at their belt, but others clenching them tightly. When she happened to pass a window, Feena caught a glimpse of silhouettes standing up on the old walkways that circled Moonshadow Hall's round roof.

It was as if someone were preparing for an attack. Feena remembered the fear in Chandri's tones when she had asked Velsinore about Keph. Tales told among Selune's clergy spoke of Sharran uprisings that could leave shrines and temples in ruins. Was someone concerned that might happen in Yhaunn?

Feena bit her tongue and hurried on, the book of the
New Moon Pact wrapped in a sleeve of her robe and clutched tight. At least chaos set tongues wagging. If nothing else, it had been easy enough to find out where Julith was being held: the winter chapel, a great round chamber that had been built onto the north side of Moonshadow Hall in the distant past as a place for the clergy to worship when bitter weather made the open courtyard unbearable. Julith had been shut inside to await her judgment.

At an intersection of corridors, Feena peered around a corner—only to duck back as a pair of armed priestesses marched past. She caught her breath and willed herself to total silence until they were gone. They wore crested steel caps. The situation seemed to be escalating and to reach the

winter chapel, she would need to pass through the temple's busiest areas. She wasn't going to be able to hide much longer.

A heap of abandoned drapes gave her an idea. Drawing the cowl of her robe over her hair, Feena snatched up the drapes and hefted them up in front of her face, then hunched down like an old woman bent under a burden. It was a pitifully crude disguise, but it would have to do. She picked her way carefully along the corridor, peering out past a fold of white fabric.

"When she first encountered another priestess, she tensed. The other woman just rushed past, however, intent on her own tasks. Feena sighed and started to relax a bit.

"Elder sister!" Idruth called. Feena's heart jumped. The cook called her again. "Elder sister! Do you have far to go?"

Feena picked a destination at random and said, "The northwest hall."

She half-turned and peeked at the cook from behind the wrappings. Idruth was lugging a great pot; the savory smell of stew drifted out of it.

"Come to the kitchen when you're done," Idruth ordered. "We have baskets of bread that need to get to the gate. The mob is turning ugly—they want their feast!"

She jogged past toward the temple gates. Feena turned to stare after her before darting away. Preparations for a funeral, fear of an attack—and the poor of Yhaunn had still come expecting the New Moon Beneficence. Another mad bend in the path of chaos!

The hallways grew quiet again as she moved farther back into the temple. Outside the doors of the winter chapel, she dumped her load of drapes. The tall doors had, over time, been covered with beaten silver and exquisitely decorated, but a simple wooden plank had been thrust between the handles to bar them. She lifted it free and swung one door open just wide enough to slip through.

Julith knelt in prayer before a broad silver font as large as a

tub. At the sound of the opening door, she looked up in fright then gasped with relief.
"Feena!"
Her eyes were red from weeping. Feena rushed across the chapel and swept her up, setting the book of the New Moon Pact aside to more fully embrace the younger priestess. Julith trembled in her arms.
"Oh, Feena! It was terrible. What Keph said—did you know he was a Sharran? And to return and find Mother Dhauna..."
"Be strong, Julith," Feena urged, rocking her gently. "What happened to you? What's going on?"
Words poured out of Julith like wine from a pitcher. Her flight with Keph at her side. The unrelenting pursuit by Velsinore, Mifano, and the clergy of Moonshadow Hall. Keph's fall, their capture, the discovery of Shar's disk. Their imprisonment—and Keph's sudden change. His taunts, his rage, and his threats against Moonshadow Hall. His escape into Shar's own darkness.
"I was so afraid, Feena," Julith moaned. "For the longest time, it seemed like there was nothing I could do—then I just screamed and screamed until Mifano and Velsinore came." She slid out of Feena's arms to crouch back down at the base of the font. "They questioned me. Mifano worked out the riddle of Keph's threat: the moment of Selune's weakness is the new moon. Tonight.
Velsinore didn't—doesn't—believe him, but he forced us all back to Yhaunn anyway. And when we got here, Mother Dhauna..."
She covered her face with her hands, and Feena brushed her dark hair gently.
"I know," Feena said. "I was the one who gave her into Selune's arms."
Julith choked and stiffened, looking up with wide, terrified eyes. Feena forced back tears, or at least tried to. She felt wet warmth on her cheeks.
"The madness had taken her, Julith. She'd given herself over

to the wolf. If there had been something else, if there had been some way to redeem her..." She reached out to squeeze Julith's hand. "Selune holds her. Remember her as she was, and mourn her later." There was a hollow in Feena's stomach, a dark misgiving. She clenched her jaw and continued, "Something is very wrong here. Keph and I talked. I knew he was a Sharran—" Julith gasped, but Feena shook her head—"He said he was trying to escape from Shar's cult. I know he was telling the truth. I can't believe he'd have such a change of heart or that he was even capable of escaping the way you say he did."

"But I saw him vanish," protested Julith. "And if you'd heard what he said to me... He was vile. He mocked us all for thinking we'd kept Shar's cult out of Yhaunn and he called me a fool for trusting him."

"He called you a fool," said Feena, "but he didn't mention me?" Her eyes narrowed. She stepped back from the other priestess and touched her medallion. "Bright Lady of the Night, reveal the secrets that darkness hides!"

Selune's soft power surged within her, then reached out toward Julith. Feena's eyes widened. All around the younger woman, the tattered remnants of magic flickered like shadows.

"What?" asked Julith. "What is it?"

"You're under a spell or something a lot like one."

Feena stepped forward again and put her hands on Julith's head. Taking a deep breath, she reached out with her faith. For a moment, it seemed as if she could feel the
chapel around her, its ancient sanctity a warm and comforting strength. She drew on that strength, weaving it together with her own.

"In Selune's name," she prayed, "let this magic be ended!"

Dismissing the spell of moonlight that Dhauna had conjured in the infirmary had been nothing, just Selune's power turned against itself. The magic that swirled around Julith was darker, more alien. Feena gasped as the shadows gave

way before the bright lance of her prayer—only to seize it, holding tight and leaping back toward her. Her breath hissed between her teeth and her gut twisted, but she bore down with the whole force of her spirit.
"Be gone!"
Moonlight shattered darkness. Julith blinked and gasped. Feena's chest heaved as she lifted her hands away.
"How do you feel?" she asked.
"Moonmaiden's grace____" The fear that had clouded
Julith's eyes was gone and they shone in the light of the chapel. "There was a woman—a Calishite—a Sharran priestess. She stepped out of shadows and cast spells on me, then disappeared with Keph. She changed my memories!"
The hollow that had been in Feena's belly filled with ice as she remembered Keph's tales of the Sharran cult.
"Variance," she said. "Her name is Variance."
"There's something else," said Julith. "Keph asked her how she found him. She told him that Selune's clergy aren't all so faithful as the moon goddess might think. If she was telling the truth..."
Someone had told the Sharrans that Keph had been captured, and Variance had taken the young man back. Feena blew out her breath and prayed that Selune would guard him from the danger he'd been plunged into. But they had their own danger, didn't they?
"By Our Silver Lady," Feena whispered, "there's a traitor in Moonshadow Hall."
She pressed her fingertips to her forehead. The traitor had to have been among the party that had set out in pursuit of her. Unfortunately, that was almost all of the priests and priestesses of Moonshadow Hall. All of the chaos going on in the temple and a traitor, too, she groaned silently. The threat of a Sharran attack, a traitor to the faith____
"Is this what you were trying to warn us about, Selune?" she murmured under her breath. "Is this the darkness in the dreams?"

"Feena," Julith asked, "if my memory of Keph's escape was false, what about the threat of an attack?"
Feena narrowed her eyes behind her fingers. "I think we still need to take it seriously," she said. "From what Keph told me about Variance, it doesn't sound like she does anything by accident. Even if she's only trying to panic us—"
Panic. The hair on the back of Feena's neck rose. If her discovery of the Sharran in the Stiltways hadn't been so thoroughly crushed—or if she had never found him at all and the well had been poisoned—Moonshadow Hall would have been on alert against the Sharran cult much earlier. There would be no racing around, bracing the temple against an unsuspected attack. They would have been on alert for days. Variance, she realized, had tried to panic them before.
But the attempt had failed because Feena's discovery had been kept secret from Selune's clergy. Or at least most of them.
She lowered her hands and looked at Julith.
"In the false memory Variance created for you," she said, "Keph mocked our confidence that there were no Sharrans in Yhaunn. How did Variance know that? I only ever told four people that I suspected there were Sharrans at all. You..."
Julith's eyes went wide and she shook her head. Feena sighed in relief. "Thank Our Silver Lady, I didn't think so."
"But you told Dhauna." Julith swallowed. "And she..."
"Even if she had somehow betrayed Selune in her madness, she was dead before you and Keph were even captured. It couldn't have .been her." Feena drew a tight breath and said, "But I also told Mifano and Velsinore."
Color burned in Julith's cheeks. "The two people in charge of Moonshadow Hall—and one of them is a traitor."
"Exactly. But they're not in charge of Moonshadow Hall." Feena lifted her chin and said, "I am." She picked up the book of the New Moon Pact and handed it to Julith. "Keep that safe. Whatever happens, it needs to be protected."
She rose to her feet, and Julith rose as well.

"Feena, whatever you're planning, I want to be with you."
Feena gave her a fast hug and said, "Thank you, Julith. Selune bless you." She turned to the great silver-bound doors of the chapel. "Selune bless us both."
Drawing a deep breath, she strode forward and flung the doors wide.

## CHAPTER 15

The corridor outside the winter chapel was wide and straight, and lit by old magic, crystals that burned silver with Selune's light. As she marched down the corridor—robe billowing around her, Julith at her side—Feena could imagine what a member of the New Moon Pact must have felt like: An avenger of Selune's faith, a defender racing to shield the innocent and unsuspecting...

Then a pair of acolytes stepped out from a side corridor, took one look at her, and fled in terror.

Julith shouted and started to leap after them, but Feena caught her arm and said, "Let them go."

"They'll go straight to a senior priestess. Everyone will know you've returned."

"They'll know soon enough anyway." She released the dark-haired priestess and kept going. That was the other side of the New Moon

Pact, she thought. Avengers and defenders—but feared by their own sisters.

She could understand that all too well.

Sounds of fresh confusion were starting to echo through Moonshadow Hall as they reached the end of the broad corridor. Feena wrenched open another pair of broad doors. Hot, muggy night air flooded into the corridor. The doors opened onto the cloisters. Directly in front of them, the full moon gate was a tall round arch, the central courtyard dark and empty beyond it. Feena stepped forward.

Julith gasped and said, "Feena, the gates—we can't enter the courtyard during a new moon!"

Feena paused on the threshold of the full moon gate-then stepped through. Nothing happened.

"Breaking a few traditions is the least of our worries, Julith."

She held out her hand. Julith swallowed, stepped through the gate, and took it. Hand in hand they walked to the center of the courtyard. When they stopped, Feena spoke a prayer. Moonlight rippled across the grass, pushing back the

shadows.
Around the cloisters, Feena could see the pale faces and robes of Selune's clergy as they gathered to stare in awe and shock. They whispered between themselves, some still clutching funeral drapings and candles, others carrying feast platters and baskets of bread. Those few who were armed hovered around the gates, hands on maces, trying to decide whether they should enter the courtyard after the offending priestesses or not. Feena let go of Julith's hand and raised her arms.
"Mifano!" she shouted. "Velsinore! Your High Moonmistress summons you!"
New gasps burst out of the watching clergy. Feena repeated her call.
A door slammed open. Priestesses leaped aside as Velsinore appeared at the waning half moon gate. Her face was white with rage.
"Feena!" she spat almost incoherently. "Julith! The traitors stand together. How dare you? You have no—"
"—no right?" Feena asked, lowering her arms. "I have every right. Fm one of Selune's priestesses. I'm the High Moonmistress of Moonshadow Hall. Who has a better right?"
"You're not the High Moonmistress!"
"With the High Moonmistress's passing, the Moonmistress-Designate takes her place."
"I think you gave up that title when you turned on Mother Dhauna," called Mifano. The silver-haired priest stood in another gate. The Waxing Crescent sword was in his hand, delicate blade burning with silver fire. His eyes were narrow. "You shouldn't have come back, Feena. Mother Dhauna is dead because of you."
More than you know, Feena thought. She forced sorrow away, stood tall, and said, "I had to come back."
"To rescue Julith?" asked Mifano. "To stand with her while her Sharran friends attack us?"
Armed priests and priestesses stood at all of the moon gates.

Their eyes darted to Mifano, but the priest shook his head. He stepped out into the courtyard and approached slowly, sword extended. After a moment, Velsinore murmured a prayer and moved forward as well. She drew the Waning Crescent sword awkwardly, but the weapon was steady in her hand as she crossed the courtyard to stand with Mifano. Feena glared at them.

"Put down your swords," she growled. "Julith is no traitor. Neither am I." She raised her voice so that all of the gathered clergy would be able to hear her. "Keph Thingoleir was trying to flee from Shar's cult. He didn't escape. Julith's memories were altered by a Sharran priestess who came to drag Keph back to Shar's embrace. Someone told that priestess that Keph had been captured. There is a traitor in Moonshadow Hall, but it's not one of us." She raised her hand and pointed at Velsinore and Mifano. "It's one of you!"

Velsinore's breath hissed through her teeth. "Ridiculous! You lie!"

"Do I?" Feena touched her medallion. "Moonmaiden hear me," she prayed. "Sanctify my words. Let no falsehood be uttered here!"

A shimmer passed over the courtyard. Feena drew a breath and lowered her hand. When she spoke, her words rang in pure, bright tones off the encircling walls of Moonshadow Hall.

"By Selune's grace, I say that one of you, Mifano and Velsinore, betrayed a penitent soul to the darkness of Shar!"

"And by the Bright Lady of the Night," snarled Mifano, "I tell you that I am no traitor to Selune!" "Nor," spat Velsinore, "am I!" Their words rang just as brightly as Feena's.

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"... but so great was Selune's weakness to the pleas of the world that she reached out and opened a passage to a distant place of flame. And Shar's peace was shattered." His voice trembling, Bolan lowered his raised arms and crossed them over his chest. "Thus was division made between the

two sisters and so has Shar ever sought to heal the rift that Selune caused." The priest raised his smooth, white face to the darkness of the temple's rocky ceiling and called, "Lady of Loss, may we do your work in fighting Selune's followers wherever we find them! Mistress of the Night, we honor you!"

"We honor Shar!" chanted the assembled cultists.

"We honor Shar," Keph chanted along with them. The words left a bad taste in his mouth. The entire ceremony made his skin creep as if filth had been spread across his body.

Somewhere in the depths of the temple, Jarull moaned. Variance hadn't cast her cloak of shadow and silence back over him. Every peak in the cultists' chants brought fresh groans and wails of torment echoing through the tunnels. Some of the cultists had looked fearful at first, but soon they seemed to revel in his sounds of anguish.

Variance stepped up to stand at Shar's altar.

"In fighting Selune's followers," she said, "we bear remembrance for all that has been taken from us. We bear remembrance for Shar's loss. We fight the Selunites as Shar fights their weak and treacherous goddess. We meet their hatred with our hatred. We do honor to Cyrume, torn apart like an animal. We do honor to Keph, returned to us by Shar's blessing." Cold, razor-edged steel flashed in the dim light as she snatched a chakram from her belt and held it high. "Shall we visit Shar's blessing on Moonshadow Hall?"

"Yes!"

Fists and weapons punched the air. Shar's faithful had armed themselves with whatever they could: clubs, knives, swords... Bolan wore a harness festooned with pouches and flasks. When he moved, cold metallic odors drifted off of him.

From where he stood behind the altar, Keph could see all of the gathered cultists, their eyes bright and their faces flush with zeal. Between them, Bolan and Variance had worked the cult into a frenzy. Talisk, Starne, and Baret were there,

lashing the air with swords and slapping at each other. They weren't the only ones caught up in the madness. An old man was shaking with murderous ecstasy. A woman in wealthy merchant's dress was tearing at her clothes. There was blood on her mouth—she had bitten herself. Someone else had begun screaming and beating on the wide metal rings Keph remembered from his initiation. The clashing sound filled the air, competing with Variance's urgent exhortations.
"Will we show the Selunites mercy?"
"No!"
"Will Moonshadow Hall stand at dawn?"
"No!"
Keph felt sick.
Variance spread her arms wide and shouted, "This night shall live in legend! May Shar grant us her divine favor!" She swept her chakram down. "It is time!"
The voices of the cultists rose in a howling chorus. Somewhere Jarull shrieked.
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The courtyard was silent, the watching clergy shocked by the contradictory truths.
Julith's voice hissed when she asked, "Feena, how—?"
Feena held up her hard, gesturing the younger priestess to silence.
Moonmaiden's grace, she wondered silently, could we have been wrong? No. Everything they had reasoned out pointed to Velsinore or Mifano as the traitor.
Feena stared at the pair, looking for something to suggest that one of them had somehow resisted her prayer and was actually lying or telling some half-truth.
Both watched her with hard eyes and held their swords of office in steady hands. Neither had the look of someone who was lying. Feena's mouth was dry as she tried to think of another possibility.
"The Sharran priestess..." she said. "She was behind the poisoning I stopped. I think she's been trying to manipulate

us into panic. Her name is Variance."
"I don't know anyone by that name," growled Velsinore, and Mifano echoed her.
Julith said, "She's a Calishite. Her hair is long. Her skin is pale and dusky, like she hasn't been in the sun for a long time."
Feena watched Mifano and Velsinore as Julith spoke, but neither reacted. She shot a glance at Julith.
The dark-haired priestess bit her lip in thought, then added, "She wore a ring, an amethyst set in old silver."
Mifano's sword wavered. Feena's eyes—and Julith's and Velsinore's—snapped to him.
"You recognize the ring?" Feena asked.
"It sounds like—" Mifano's lips drew tight. "Lady Monstaed has taken to wearing a ring like that. But she's not Calishite."
"When did she start wearing the ring?"
"Less than a month ago." Doubt creeped into his eyes as he said, "About the time she transferred the lease on her properties from Ladysluck Tower to Moonshadow Hall."
"Did you tell Lady Monstaed about my encounter in the Stiltways and that I thought there were Sharrans in Yhaunn?" Feena asked.
His mouth opened then closed, and he nodded. "I told her about that," he said. His sword fell. "Selune's shining face, I told her everything that happened in Moonshadow Hall."
Julith gasped. All around the cloisters, whispers of alarm and surprise rolled through the assembled clergy. Hope leaped inside Feena—Mifano was no traitor, only a dupe!
"And you told Lady Monstaed about Keph's capture?" she asked.
Mifano blinked—and shook his head. "No," he said. "Feena, I swear I haven't even stopped to think about her since your attack on Dhauna."
His words rang with truth. And Feena realized, why should Mifano have contacted Lady Monstaed back in Yhaunn to

pass on news of Keph anyway? He couldn't have known she'd be interested in the young man. She ground her teeth as the brief moment of hope faded.
Worse, the only evidence linking Variance to Velsinore or Mifano was useless. Mifano's gossip had let Variance know about Moonshadow Hall's misplaced confidence. But if he hadn't been the one to tell the Sharran priestess about Keph's capture...
"Someone is still a traitor," Feena said. She looked up. "Velsinore, who—"
The tall priestess's sword snapped up defensively. "I certainly didn't tell this Variance anything!" she snapped.
Feena groaned and said, "I didn't say you did. I need to know if anyone among the clergy who rode with you last night might have—"
"Wait." Julith laid her arm on Feena's arm. "We've made a mistake." Feena glanced at her. The priestess was looking at Velsinore intently. "Variance said that not all of Selune's clergy are faithful. She never said that one of us told her about Keph's capture."
"I certainly didn't tell this Variance anything," Velsinore had said. Selune's power confirmed that statement as the truth. But Variance wasn't the only Sharran in Yhaunn, was she?
"Velsinore," Feena spat, "did you tell anyone about Keph's capture?" She stepped forward. "Answer me! Did you betray Keph to the Sharrans?"
The tall priestess took a step back, her eyes wide and her mouth open.
"I... I..." she stuttered, as if trying to form words when none would come, as if the power of a goddess prevented her from speaking a lie.
Feena bared her teeth. She didn't know how Velsinore had managed to deny that she was a traitor to Selune, but her falsehood had caught her! Whispers around the cloisters turned into a surging, seething muddle of confusion. Velsinore squeezed her mouth shut. Growling, Feena

reached out for her.
Velsinore whirled and lashed out with her sword.
Caught by surprise, Mifano gasped in shock as the shining blade sliced into his body. Feena heard the metal grate against bone and leaped back in shock. In the cloisters, confusion rose into screaming chaos. Velsinore twisted around, letting go of the sword, and shoved Mifano's jerking body to the ground. Feena and Julith dodged forward almost as one to catch him.
As they reacted, Velsinore turned and sprinted out of the courtyard, back toward the waning half moon gate. The priests and priestesses standing in the gate and the cloisters scrambled to get out of her way. In less than a heartbeat, she had vanished into Moonshadow Hall.
"Moonmaiden's grace!" Feena cursed at the merciless distraction.
Mifano's blood was pouring across her hands. The silver-haired priest's breath was coming in rattling rasps.
"Down!" ordered Julith. "Put him down!" She raised her eyes to the swirling, swooning clergy. "Chandri! I'm going to need your help to save him!" She glanced at Feena. "Go get Velsinore! I'll handle this!'
Feena grimaced and slid Mifano into her arms, then rose and charged after Velsinore. Clergy dodged out of her way almost as quickly as they had dodged out of Velsinore's. Feena opened the door through which the traitorous priestess had vanished and plunged inside.
There was no sign of Velsinore, but even in scant moments she could have easily gotten out of sight. With the milling priestesses and priests out in the cloisters still screaming, the echo of running footsteps would be drowned out as well. Sound and sight weren't the only means of tracking at Feena's disposal, however. She concentrated, seeking the balance between woman and wolf that was her hybrid form. It wasn't easy—both woman and wolf were furious and it was tempting simply to let the beast take over. Feena strained

and resisted the impulse. She wanted answers and she wasn't going to get them if she tore Velsinore apart.
"Selune, help me," she murmured and took a deep breath as fur rippled over her skin and her joints shifted within the folds of the robe.
Her next breath brought a flood of scents to a wolfs nose: The odor of human fear, thick and overwhelming as panic swirled in Moonshadow Hall; the musty scent of funeral drapes and candles; the rich smells of Idruth's kitchen. She picked Velsinore's scent out of the flood easily, though—musty like the drapes, but with a hint of something dark and metallic: the odor of the medicines in the infirmary. With a start, Feena realized she recognized that smell from somewhere else. It was remarkably similar to the Sharran poison. Not the same, but close, as if the medicines and the poison originated in the same place.
What had Velsinore been doing?
Feena loped after the priestess. Velsinore's scent led down toward the kitchen. Feena growled. The kitchen garden... she couldn't be the only person who knew the trick of getting out over the garden wall. With Moonshadow Hall on alert against the possibility of a Sharran attack, the door from the kitchen to the garden would
certainly be sealed, but it wouldn't be nearly as heavily guarded as the temple's main gates.
If it was sealed at all, she realized. The main gates were Mifano's responsibility as the bearer of the Waxing Crescent, but the kitchen, like the infirmary, was Velsinore's.
She paused outside the kitchen and shifted back into her human shape, then opened the door carefully and peered inside. Everything seemed still and quiet. Across the cavernous room, she could see that the door to the garden had indeed been sealed. A huge plate of solid steel had been fastened into place over it. No one was getting into or out of Moonshadow Hall that way without considerable effort.

Which meant that Velsinore was trapped inside the kitchen. Feena stepped through the door and put her back against a wall. There was still no movement.
"Velsinore?" called Feena. "Velsinore, why did you do it? Why did you turn your back on Selune?"
"Turn my back on Selune?" Velsinore's voice came from somewhere to the right. Feena began to creep that way as the tall priestess spoke. "I'm no traitor, Feena."
"How can you say that?" Feena asked. She kept moving. A rack of pots drew her attention. Was that a shape crouched behind it?
"Because it's the truth. Don't you remember the evidence of your own prayer?"
Feena clenched her jaw and said, "When I came back to Moonshadow Hall with the poison from the Stiltways, you couldn't deny the presence of Sharrans in Yhaunn quickly enough."
"The Sharrans were as surprised as you to learn that I knew about them," said Velsinore. Her voice was quiet and Feena heard her shift slightly. The shape behind the rack of pots didn't move—it was just a big cauldron. Feena froze and looked around as Velsinore continued, "You were right—whoever Variance is, I didn't speak to her. The Sharrans in Yhaunn are led by—"
"—Bolan," Feena supplied. "You told Bolan and Bolan told Variance."
A tall cupboard stood strangely ajar. She slid toward
it.
Velsinore was silent for a moment, then hissed, "You know more than it seems."
"Keph told me. Bolan's an alchemist as well as a Sharran priest." Her eyes narrowed as she closed on the cupboard. "The medicines in the infirmary..."
"Purchased from Bolan," confirmed Velsinore. "Until I contacted him with news of Keph's capture, he thought I was nothing more than a simple devotee who liked to gossip."

Her voice turned scornful. "It sounds like I played him just as Variance played Mifano. I've been drawing information about Sharran beliefs out of him ever since I stumbled across him a year ago."
Velsinore's voice was close. Definitely close. Feena moved up to the cupboard from the side.
"Why reveal yourself now, then?" asked Feena. "And why keep what you learned about the Sharrans a secret from Dhauna and Mifano?"
"Turning over Keph seemed like an advantageous way to introduce myself. And why keep what I learned a secret?" She paused for a moment. "Let's say I was biding my time. If Dhauna hadn't lost her mind and brought you to Moonshadow Hall, I would have become the Moonmistress-Designate."
"What about Mifano?" Feena asked.
Velsinore laughed and said, "He was never really a contender. I had Mother Dhauna's ear."
"And when you were finally High Moonmistress, what then? What would you have done with all the information you had collected on the Sharrans? Wiped them out in one big raid and taken all the glory?"
"Not exactly." Velsinore's voice dropped. "I would have invited them into Moonshadow Hall."
Feena froze, and Velsinore laughed again.
"Let me put it in terms you'll understand," the traitor priestess said. "When you fight the servants of Malar—evil lycanthropes—what is it that sets you apart from them? You all become animals, don't you? What is
it that sets Sharrans apart from Selunites? Their darkness to our light? Do you know that we share many of the same legends?" Velsinore drew a slow breath and said, "I'm no traitor to Selune, Feena. I've just realized that there's more to the relationship between the Moonmaiden and the Mistress of the Night than our faith wants to admit."
It felt then as if Feena was back in her dream, with an

ancient, whispering darkness pursuing her. Her stomach lurched in horror. Selune had been trying to warn them of heresy within Moonshadow Hall—the very heresy Dhauna had dismissed as nothing more than lies. The New Moon Pact might have been framed for the heresy that had brought them low, but Velsinore had fallen straight into that twisted belief.

Feena had rediscovered the New Moon Pact. Velsinore had rediscovered the New Moon Heresy.

"Stop it!" Feena snarled.

She lunged for the open door of the cupboard and ripped it wide. It was empty.

Gray robes flashed in the corner of her eye. Feena spun around as Velsinore rose from behind the cauldron she had dismissed earlier. She took a step toward the tall priestess.

"You're wrong," Feena spat. "Selune and Shar are enemies!"

"Maybe we only think they are."

Feena's breath hissed between her teeth. "Our Silver Lady have mercy upon you, Velsinore. You're wrong. You may not think you're a traitor to Selune, but you are!"

"Then why does she still answer my prayers?" Velsinore thrust out her hand, Selune's medallion in her grasp. "Moonmaiden, scour my enemies!"

A scream wrenched itself out of Feena as silver-white fire burst all around her, burning her flesh and searing her very soul.

The Sharrans poured out of a cramped tunnel and through a splintered wall into a dusty cellar beneath a broom-maker's shop. Had the shopkeeper known what the broken wall had hidden? Keph didn't think so—there was blood on the shop floor and the smell of death in the air. Someone had been murdered to keep the newly opened passage a secret.

Outside the shop, the night was sweltering hot and still. Clouds veiled the stars. Far off in the distance over the Sea of Fallen Stars, heat lightning lit the sky in silent display. Yhaunn seemed to hold its breath. The chants and clashing

that had accompanied the cult through the tunnels beneath the city fell silent. Most of the cultists slipped into the shadows, and all Keph could think of was a swarm of rats darting through the streets.

Variance walked down the center of the street like some kind of dark matron and where she walked the shadows grew deeper, cloaking her skulking children. Anyone meeting the dark tide in the street would surely vanish into it, and anyone glancing out a window would see nothing but thick shadow and vague figures.

Keph had been counting the cultists. He edged up beside Variance as they strode along.

"You have twenty-eight madmen and women following you," he whispered. "That's not going to be enough to launch an assault on Moonshadow Hall. If the Selunites can't stop you themselves, the city guard will!"

Variance looked at him. He could barely see her face, but her voice was low and calm. "Are you trying to convince me to stop the attack?"

His stomach twisted. "You're leading the cult into a massacre."

Faster than he would have thought possible, her hand lashed out and dug into his shoulder. Her fingers were hard. He gasped.

"You should only worry about the task ahead of you," she said. "When the time comes, I suggest that you run for Fourstaves House very quickly. You won't have long before the distraction begins." Keph caught the flash of

a frown. "For now, stay close and hold your tongue. I will turn Shar's magic against you if I have to." ' She released him and he staggered. A short distance away, Bolan snickered.

"Keph! Hey, Keph!" Baret jogged over to him. "Where's Jarull tonight?"

Keph could feel Variance's eyes on him. He ground his teeth together.

"Jarull... is out of Yhaunn," Keph lied. "He's gone to Ravens Bluff."
"Why would he do that? He's going to miss everything!"
Baret sounded genuinely disappointed.
"Maybe Shar called him," Keph answered.
"Dark!" Baret said in wonder. "Both of you touched by the goddess!" He drew a deep breath. "Talisk, Starne, and me were wondering if we could stand with you during the assault. Talisk says that if Shar rescued you from the Selunites, she must have you marked. We could be an honor guard for you."
Keph's throat seemed to close around his breath. "No," he said.
"Come on!"
"I said, no!"
Keph reached out and pushed the other man away, Baret stumbled and cursed.
"Keph's modesty ill becomes one favored of Shar," interrupted Variance. Keph whirled on her. The priestess was wearing a smile. "The Lady of Loss has given him a special task tonight, one he must perform alone. But such faith as yours will be rewarded, Baret. Bring Talisk and Starne to me and receive the blessing of Shar's own strength."
Awe crossed Baret's face. "Yes, Mother Night!"
He disappeared into the shadows. Variance watched after him for a moment. Keph glared at her.
"He doesn't deserve to die," he said between clenched teeth.
"He came to Shar's embrace willingly—even more
willingly than you did." She stopped abruptly then called, "Bolan!"
Without further instruction, Bolan swiftly herded the other cultists away from her. Keph looked around, uneasy. They stood at an intersection, a quiet square that stood under the watchful eye of a statue dedicated to some otherwise unremarkable merchant prince. He knew the square.

Moonshadow Hall lay a short distance almost directly along one of the intersecting streets—and Fourstaves House off along another.
"Perhaps," said Variance, "you'll find that Shar triumphs over Selune after all, Keph."
Once again, the shadows seemed to thicken around her. Keph shuddered. In spite of himself, he took a step closer to the priestess. Facing the watching statue, she held out a hand and beckoned with two fingers.
"By the power of the Mistress of the Night, I bid you come forth, O beasts of Shadow!"
Around the plinth on which the statue stood, shadows lengthened and deepened, then swirled and condensed. Something within them moved—and five massive dogs came padding silently into the square. Keph shuddered and moved back. The dogs were as black as the night itself, with smooth, shining coats over thick muscles, and malevolent eyes above powerful jaws. And Variance wasn't finished.
"Come forth!" she said. "Come forth! In Shar's name, come forth!"
The black dogs kept coming until eighteen of the beasts squatted and stalked in the square. Even Shar's faithful pressed back from them. One of the dogs growled at Bolan and the priest took a cautious step away.
"Be calm," Variance commanded. "They're shadow mastiffs—our allies." She raised her hands and Keph could feel the power that flowed from her as she made a final call. "Rax! Variance Amatick summons you to Shar's service. Bound by ancient contracts, I call you now. Rax, stand forth!"
The shadows didn't so much condense then as collapse.
The final shadow mastiff to step onto the square was as large as a warhorse and brutally scarred. All of the other dogs looked to it with deference.
Variance held out her hand and said, "I would have you be my lieutenant tonight, Rax. Half of these beasts will be your pack. I ask only that you cause the greatest confusion

possible." Her hand swept around the square. "In return I offer three nights hunting upon Faerun with Shar's blessing."
The huge dog's eyes narrowed and it let out a growl. Something about the sound of the black beast struck terror deep into Keph's soul.
Variance nodded calmly and said, "I thank you, Rax. Choose your pack and go. Your territory lies that way."
She turned and pointed—but not toward Moonshadow Hall or even Fourstaves House. She pointed down a third street. Directly toward the night-crowded maze of the Stiltways.
Rax growled again and trotted off. Nine of the other mastiffs followed. Variance turned to Keph.
"There is your distraction," she said. "You'd best hurry if you want to make the best of it. When you have the tiles, bring them to me at the east wall of Moonshadow Hall. I'll be waiting for you." Keph stared at her. Her eyebrows arched. "Go!" she commanded. Her hand jabbed in the direction of Fourstaves House.
Keph whirled and ran. Behind him he could hear Variance as she called out to the cultists, "Come forward and receive Shar's blessing, for now we join her battle!"
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The gout of divine fire lasted only moments, but it left Feena writhing on the floor of the kitchen. Footsteps approached—she forced herself to roll over and raise her head. Velsinore looked down at her. In her hands she clutched a long iron rod, a spit from the kitchen.
"Tell me, Feena," she said. "If Selune is good and Shar is evil, then why does Selune grant me the power to do this to you?"
Feena looked down at her hands. They were burned red and raw. It hurt to flex her fingers. The sleeves of her robe were smoldering. She groaned and sat back on her heels, looking up at Velsinore.
"I asked myself that question when Mother Dhauna forced

me to attack her," Feena snarled. Her lungs burned with every breath. "This is what I think: Selune grants you power, but you choose how to use it. Selune isn't evil. You are."
Rage flared in Velsinore's eyes and she swung the rod with both hands. Feena hurled herself aside, tumbling across the kitchen floor. The rod hit the stone of the floor with a resounding clang. Sparks and chips of stone spat from the impact. Velsinore heaved the rod back up and whirled after her, but Feena rolled back to her feet. One hand grabbed for her medallion.
"Bright Lady of the Night, lay your touch upon me!" she prayed.
Cool magic washed over her, soothing the worst of her burns. Feena gasped in relief and dodged back from another wild swing of Velsinore's rod. She darted swiftly to the side of the big cauldron, putting it between her and the tall priestess.
"You asked me another question," Feena said. "If you're a traitor, why does Selune still answer your prayers?"
"Do you have a homespun answer to that too?" asked Velsinore. She stalked around the cauldron, but Feena just moved with her. "Let's hear it."
"Selune answers your prayers so that you know her power and never forget that she's there for you. She answers your prayers so that one day you will come back to her."
Velsinore's hands slid to one end of the rod and she swept it out in a wide, flat arc. Feena ducked down and let it hum over her head. Thrusting her weight against the cauldron, she sent the huge pot screeching across the floor. Velsinore gasped and stumbled back. The iron
rod went flying from her hands to ring against a distant wall.
Feena darted out. Velsinore had already recovered her balance and stood ready for her. They crouched, circling each other like animals.
"Here's a question for you, Velsinore," Feena said. "If the Sharrans are suddenly your friends and allies, what's going

to happen to you when they attack Moonshadow Hall?"
"They won't attack. They're too weak, and Bolan is a coward."
"Bolan doesn't lead them any more in anything but name," Feena reminded her. "Variance does and if she's been manipulating us, she's been manipulating them."
Velsinore's face flushed red. "You're lying," she spat.
"You've deluded yourself." Feena stopped and took a slow step back from Velsinore. "Come back to Selune. You're wrong, but we all mistakes. Find your faith again and-"
"I'm not the one who's wrong and I haven't lost my faith! I never left Selune, you mangy dog!" Her eyes flashed and the fingers of one hand curled into a sign. "By the Moonmaiden's light," she howled, "let your hidden spirit be revealed!"
When Mother Dhauna had spoken the prayer, Feena had been caught off guard by the attack of a beloved friend—but she had been facing a friend. As silver light shot out from between Velsinore's fingers, Feena threw herself away across the floor. Face grim, Velsinore swept the light to follow her. On a long counter, polished pieces of silver plate had been laid out in preparation for a feast that would never happen. Feena hurled herself into the shadow of the counter just as distant shouts of alarm and confusion came echoing through the corridors and into the kitchen.
"... dark mist! There's a cloud of dark mist on the west side of the temple!"
"Take positions. Get the novices to safety. Someone summon the guard!"
"There's still a crowd outside the gates!"
"Do you hear that, Velsinore?" Feena shouted over the top of the counter. "That's your friends coming. That's the Sharrans attacking!"
"Focus, Feena," Velsinore replied. "You've never had focus. The Sharrans aren't fighting me right now. You are."
The bright moonbeam of Velsinore's spell wavered overhead

as she slid closer to the counter. Feena watched the shadows dance and drew a deep breath.
"Moonmaiden guide me," she murmured.
She leaped to her feet. Moonlight washed over her, stirring the wolf within and trying to force her body to transform. Teeth clenched, she fought back the transformation as she snatched up a big silver platter from the counter and held it up like a shield.
Reflected moonlight flashed back at Velsinore.
Magic intended to affect a lycanthrope had no effect on her, but the sudden reflection of light was dazzling. Velsinore's free hand shot up to block it and she glanced away out of instinct. In that brief moment, Feena jumped up on the counter and leaped at her with an angry shout.
"Selune!"
Velsinore gasped and tried to duck, but she wasn't fast enough. Feena's arm caught her around the chest. The two priestesses slammed to the floor, locked in struggle. Moonlight winked out. Feena managed to get an arm around Velsinore's neck in a chokehold, but Velsinore slid her arms free. One hand scrabbled for her medallion. Feena growled and snatched at it.
Too late. Velsinore's fingers closed.
"May Selune's touch turn against you!" she gasped with her last breath.
Her arm snapped up, slapping the hard metal of the medallion against Feena's neck just at her shoulder.
Feena screamed as pain split her flesh. Under her robe, she could feel wounds opening, gushing blood. The magic tore into her, sinking deep into her flesh. Something
ripped inside her chest. Her grip on Velsinore loosened. The traitorous priestess started to slip free.
Feena clenched her teeth and tightened her hold, clawing with her other hand for a new grasp on Velsinore's head.
"By my faith and for Mother Dhauna," she gasped, "Bright Lady of the Night give strength to my arms!"

The prayer hadn't even left her mouth before Selune's power descended on her. For just a moment, it seemed that she was whole and uninjured. Magic thundered in her muscles. With a wild cry, she jerked them tight.

Velsinore's head wrenched around and her neck snapped with a loud crack. Her body shuddered once, then went limp. Heresy died.

Feena clutched a dead weight in her arms. She pushed Velsinore away. The effort sent new pain ripping through her. Feena choked and toppled onto her back. Velsinore's final twisted curse had done something awful inside her. A cough wracked her and she could feel warm blood spatter across her lips. The borrowed strength of the goddess was already slipping away. Like a dream in the distance, she could hear the frightened shouts of Moonshadow Hall—and a sudden fierce cry: the charge of Shar's cult.

Moonshadow Hall needed her, if not as High Moonmistress, then at least as a warrior. She tried to move her arm, to reach for Selune's medallion. She tried to force the words of a prayer—Bright Lady of the Night, lay your touch upon me!—out of her throat.

Her arm didn't move. Her prayer drowned in blood.

ran through streets that seemed darker than he had ever known them. Was it just his imagination or was it some foul magic of Variance's? Did Shar's gaze rest upon Yhaunn? He could almost believe it did. He could almost believe he had brought disaster down on the entire city.

Sweat streamed from his forehead, catching in his eyebrows and dripping into his eyes. It poured down his back. His shirt was plastered to his skin. His breath came in huge, thick gasps. It felt as though his chest was ready to rip itself apart; cramps cut into his sides. Anyone who glimpsed him must have thought he'd gone mad.

He didn't dare to stop or even to slow down. Variance had studied him, and his family, too well. The attack of the shadow mastiffs on the Stiltways would be too much for the

city guard to handle, especially combined with an attack on Moonshadow Hall. Faced with a threat to the city, Strasus Thingoleir wouldn't even hesitate before throwing himself and his entire family into the fight.

It didn't seem possible for his knotted guts to twist any tighter, but Keph could feel them clench with the hollow, watery feeling of new fear. The wizards of Fourstaves House would save many lives in the Stiltways. He knew that. They would drive the black dogs back—but not without risk to themselves. A vision of monstrous Rax flitted through Keph's mind. If Strasus, Dagnalla, Malia, Krin, or Roderio was hurt or killed because of what he'd caused____

But he couldn't leave Jarull in Variance's grasp either. His family had a chance at least. They were powerful. They had magic. Jarull was already a prisoner, mad and tortured solely because Variance had needed something to hold over Keph's head.

He choked and tried to run a little faster. You idiot, he cursed himself, you stupid, stupid idiot!

The first deadly howls drifted over Yhaunn from the Stiltways as Keph tore around a corner and sprinted across the small courtyard toward Fourstaves House. The three stone dogs at the door growled and bristled at his sudden approach—Keph didn't think he had ever been so happy to see them. Compared to the shadow mastiffs, they were like puppies! He thrust his hands out for them to smell, but kept moving, reaching for the door before the guardians had fully taken his scent. One of them snapped at him. Keph froze, his chest heaving.

"Hurry!" he implored the stone animals. "Hurry!"

It took only a moment before the dogs relaxed. It seemed like forever. He pushed the door open. The entrance hall was empty, but Fourstaves House was alive with shouts and commotion. Up in the family wing and down along the warded corridor of workshops, doors were banging as the Thingoleir wizards prepared for battle. Keph darted across

the hall and threw himself into the shadows of a parlor. Pressed up against a wall, he tried to stifle his panting gasps.

Scant thundering heartbeats later, he heard Strasus's voice call, "Are we ready?" A small chorus answered him in the affirmative. "Then may Mystra ride with us!"

Keph held his breath as footsteps raced down the grand staircase and across the entrance hall. The door opened—outside, the stone dogs whined in greeting at their master—and closed again. Keph released his breath, slid over to a window, and twitched aside a heavy curtain. Out in the courtyard, Strasus held out his hand and spoke a word of magic. Mist and faint glimmers of light swirled into the form of a silver-gray horse. Dagnalla cast the same spell and the two elder wizards mounted while their children and son-in-law worked magic of their own and rose up into the air.

Strasus urged his phantom horse around to face the mansion. In the window Keph froze, but his father just raised his staff and uttered another magical word—and a command: "Let none enter!"

For an instant, green light shone bright enough to illuminate the courtyard. Lines of magic laced across the window in front of Keph's face then faded—a new ward. He swallowed.

Strasus touched heels to his mount's side and pulled on shadowy reins. The apparition reared silently and began to gallop up into the night as if climbing a hill. Dagnalla rode at his side, with Malia, Roderio, and Krin soaring around them both.

The five wizards of Fourstaves House raced off like heroes. Keph turned away from the window and slunk back out into the entrance hall.

Halfway across the hall, an underbutler stopped, startled. "Sir!" he said in surprise. "I didn't realize you were here."

The man's eyes were wide. Keph realized what he must look like—but then again, he'd come home more than once looking much worse. He forced back a grimace and feigned a

lazy, drunken sneer.
"I was asleep in the parlor until all the racket happened." He strutted across the hall and turned up the staircase. "If anyone asks, do me a favor and tell them you haven't seen me."
The underbutler swallowed and said, "Sir, your father did leave instructions for all of us—the next time we saw you, we were to tell you that he would like to have a word with you at your convenience."
"Did he?" Keph turned to look back at the servant. An angry retort started to roll off his lips out of pure habit. "Well, you can tell the old man that—" he caught himself and bit his tongue—"you can tell him that I send him my respect."
"Sir?"
"You heard me," Keph growled. "Now don't you have something to do? Be about your duties!"
Keph leaped up the stairs two at a time without looking back. It would look strange if he were to turn down the north hall toward Strasus's study. At the top of the stairs, he turned south instead, toward the family quarters. As soon as he was out of sight of the stairs, however, he stopped and sagged against the wall. Too close, he thought. That was all too close. He closed his eyes for a moment. His limbs were shaking and weak after his run, but he couldn't stop yet.
Forcing his eyes open, he creeped back out to the end of the corridor and looked down over the entrance hall. The underbutler was gone. Keph darted across to the north corridor. Once again, wards brushed against him like spiderwebs as he passed under the archway. He shuddered at their touch.
The floor outside Roderio's laboratory was still stained. Keph looked away and hurried on down the corridor's length, passing other doors: Malia's laboratory, shared with Krin; Dagnalla's workroom; the arcane library shared by all of the wizards; and at the end of the hall, Strasus's study. Keph stopped in front of the study door. When was the last time

he'd entered the study? Years ago. Had he ever tried to enter when Strasus wasn't there? He couldn't recall. He didn't think so. But Roderio and Malia did it all the time. Taking a deep breath, he reached down and squeezed the door's ornate latch.

It was locked by a plain mechanical lock. He could feel the metal bolt clicking and pulling with each squeeze of the latch. Keph's lips twitched. So much panic, only to be stopped by a humble lock? He groaned and slapped at the wood of the door in frustration.

Something seemed to crawl across his hand. The latch appeared to shift slightly.

Keph started, pulling his hand away. The crawling sensation vanished and the latch stiffened once more. He frowned at the wood, then slowly pressed his hand back against it. The strange sensation returned, playing over his hand like a dog snuffling at his scent. Keph's breath hissed. He kept his hand in place. Another ward? The answer came in a heartbeat as the latch gave way to his grasp. The crawling sensation disappeared.

It couldn't be that easy, could it? Cautious, Keph pushed open the door.

On a perch just inside the study, a strange bird croaked and stirred, turning its head to look at him.

He froze. It was no bird. Its feathers were burnished copper, its head and wings cast to resemble a stylized hawk. Its eyes were fashioned from chips of sapphire— exactly the same glittering blue as the sapphire that decorated Quick's hilt.

The copper hawk had something else in common with Quick, too. Still staring at Keph, it rattled its wings. Sparks flashed between the thin metal plates of its feathers.

"Oh, Beshaba's ivory arms," Keph cursed.

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The stone, mortar, and wood of Moonshadow Hall tickled at Feena as she rose slowly up through the temple's structure. For a long moment, it seemed as if she were everywhere

within the old walls all at once. She stood among frightened novices as elderly priestesses tried to calm them in spite of being terrified themselves. She stood within the gates as younger priestesses and priests gripped maces in preparation for battle. She stood above
the gates as acolytes rang alarm bells to alert the city guard to danger. She passed through the infirmary where Chandri spoke desperate prayers of healing over Mifano. She passed through the archives, through dusty storerooms, and through the cold vaults and crypts that lay beneath the temple.
And as soon as she wondered at the wash of impressions and the miraculous vision, she realized what was happening.
Moonmaiden's grace, she cursed, I'm dead!
"Feena! Feena!"
Julith's voice. Where was she? Feena tried to call out, to turn around and find the younger priestess. There wasn't time. Suddenly, irresistibly, she was outside of Moonshadow Hall and gazing down upon it.
Clergy crawled around the ring of the temple roof. Moonshadow Hall had known nothing but peace for generations, but abruptly Feena could see that it had once been intended as a solidly defensible building. The walkway that circled the roof was protected by parapets. Above the false, decorative gates that marked the outer walls, guardhouses stood out, additional protection for defenders. The temple's original windows faced only inward—attackers would have to storm the main gates or climb the high, smooth walls to gain entrance.
At least they would have centuries ago. Generations of alterations had weakened Selune's temple. The wall of the kitchen garden looped away from the temple like a bubble. The slope of the winter chapel's roof was a ramp reaching almost to the top of the walls. A bold attacker could cross the gap with a leap. Here and there, windows had been forced through the outer wall. Guardhouses and parapets

crumbled in disrepair. Mifano and Velsinore had been the only leaders of Moonshadow Hall to dismiss the Sharran threat, it seemed!

To the west of the temple, she could see the lingering cloud of dark mist that screams had described as she had struggled with Velsinore. A few of Selune's clerics still looked out that way, but more were racing around the
roofs to take positions on the east and south as figures broke from shadows to surge around the temple walls. Feena drew a sharp breath. The mist had been a trick to draw attention from the real attack. On the east the figures had grappling hooks to attack the walls. On the south, outside the gates, they had an easier target: the mob of poor who had gathered to demand a share of the New Moon Beneficence were fleeing or falling before the screaming Sharrans. Selune's priestesses had tried to get some of the poor inside the protection of the temple. Now they struggled to close the gates against the rush of Sharrans!

There were more than just humans among the cultists, too. Feena could see some kind of beasts loping alongside them. Wolves? No, huge dogs—but not natural animals at all. Creatures summoned by dark magic. Feena growled under her breath. Cyrume, the cultist in the Stiltways— had his body been ravaged by one of those beasts in order to frame her? She struggled to turn her head, trying to see more.

Shadows crawled up the roof of the winter chapel toward the top of the walls. The Sharrans had found Moonshadow Hall's weakness. Feena tried to call out a warning to Selune's defenders.

Nothing happened. She couldn't speak. She couldn't move. She just kept rising, higher and higher above Moonshadow Hall, up toward a full moon that hung bigger, brighter, and more beautiful than any she had ever seen in her life.

A blue-haired woman stood in the air before her, soft wings beating slowly at her back, arms outstretched in welcome though her eyes seemed to hold immeasurable sorrow.

Feena recognized her from legends and from the tall relief that stood against Moonshadow Hall's pale walls—one of the seven Shards, Selune's greatest servants. The Shard smiled softly, sadly, and beckoned to her.
Fear sharper than pain stabbed through Feena.
No, she whimpered silently. No, I can't. I won't. I'm needed!
"Feena! Feena!" Julith's voice called again, growing distant.
Closer—much closer—there was a growl. A chorus of growls, like a pack of wolves at her back.
No, like a Pact. Feena was aware of Niree Swifthands's lean gray form to one side of her and Rade's black bulk to the other. More animal voices rose behind her. Tyver Thorndrove's human voice rang out in triumph above them all.
"She denies death, Shard! There is still hope. She denies death!"
The Shard's beckoning gestured slowed, then stopped. Her arm fell back to her side and her eyes... her eyes shone with joy.
She faded from the sky and the glorious full moon faded along with her. Darkness fell.
A darkness that surged with whispers. Feena stared into it. Selune's warning? That couldn't be right. The New Moon Heresy was dead once more, killed along with Velsinore. The New Moon Pact had been rediscovered. What more was there?
She found her voice and called, "Tyver!"
The Peacemaker was crouched in front of her. "Feena! Feena, listen to me! The Pact—"
"The darkness, Tyver!" Feena screamed at him "What is it? I still don't understand what Selune wants of me!"
"There are things that should not be understood. There are things that must not be spoken. When the time comes, you'll know what to do," Tyver said, then he reached down and grasped her shoulders. "Feena, if you would deny death for Selune's service, enter the Pact!"

"Tyver, J don't-"
"The Pact, Feena!" Tyver shook her hard. "Enter the waters of the moon—" "Feena! "shouted Julith.
Feena coughed. Blood sprayed out of her throat and she gulped air. Close by, Julith gasped. Feena groaned and opened her eyes. She was still on the floor of the kitchen, though Julith had her sitting up, her hands on
Feena's shoulders. The young priestess's symbol of Selune dangled around her neck. Feena could feel the fading remnants of healing magic coursing through her body-but too little and very nearly too late. Blood had spread in a pool around her. Her head felt light.
She didn't have long. She could feel it.
"Oh, Feena," Julith said. "What did Velsinore do to you?"
"The attack?" slurred Feena. Speaking hurt. "What's happening?"
"We're holding the Sharrans off," said Julith, "but just barely. They tried to climb the winter chapel and—"
"I know." She shook her head at Julith's look of amazement. "You stopped them?" Julith nodded and Feena grunted. "Good. The book of the New Moon Pact. Where is it?"
"I—" Under smears of blood, Julith's face went pale. "I dropped it in the courtyard!"
Enter the waters of the moon—Selune's sacred pool.
"Take me there." She got a hand onto Julith's shoulder and tried to stand. The effort sent a wave of pain through her. Julith hissed and caught her as she fell backward.
"You need more healing than I can give you," Julith said. "We need to get you to—"
Feena opened her mouth and spat out more blood. "Get me to the courtyard!" she choked.
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"Nice bird," said Keph. "Pretty bird."
The copper falcon cocked its head. Keph stretched out a hand as if the wondrous construct might somehow catch his scent. Why not? It worked for the stone dogs at the door of

Fourstaves House. It had seemed to work with the creeping ward on the study door. He held his breath, praying that his luck would hold out and that the falcon would let him pass as well.

The metal bird leaned forward. Keph stepped through the door and into the study, moving a little closer. "Good bird," he murmured. "Good bird..."

Whether he had moved too close or too fast, he couldn't tell, but the bird pulled back, its wings spread wide. Keph could see the blue sparks that danced along them and his nose caught the sharp smell of lightning. He froze but the bird didn't relax. He stretched his hand out a little farther.

The bird's wings snapped down and its body stiffened as its hooked beak opened and vomited a thin, crackling stream of lightning at him. Keph felt the energy crack into his outstretched fingertips and writhe up his arm. He snatched his burning hand back with a yelp, shaking it against the sudden sharp pain.

"Ow! Beshaba's-"

The copper falcon stiffened again, wings out then down. Keph danced aside just in time as lightning arced down to the floor where he'd been standing. The falcon's head swiveled, following him. Its wings pumped again. Keph stifled a curse and dodged back. Another stream of lightning crackled across the study, then another.

A long arc caught his leg. Keph choked on another yelp and hopped frantically. He needed cover against the metal guardian, but unfortunately there was none. Strasus's study was open, with bookshelves back against the walls and three tall tables too high to hide behind and too solid to consider tipping over—if he'd been able to reach them. The falcon spat its lightning with disturbing efficiency, keeping him boxed in by the door as if to give him the option of retreat.

Except that retreat wasn't an option. At least not yet. He needed the slate tiles. If he could find them, maybe he could get past the falcon, grab them, and get out again. Keph

scanned the tables and shelves as more lightning - chased him back across the room. Books, strange figures, talismans, fetishes from distant lands, scrolls, a pile of crumbling leather, a rust-eaten sword, a heap of odd coins...

Coins. The conversation he'd overheard around the breakfast table came back to him. Krin had described coins that had been found with the tiles. On the same table as the coins, the ancient leather, and the rusty sword, a big piece of gray silk covered something flat and thick.

The tiles?

Keph clenched his teeth and hurled himself toward the table, straight past the copper falcon's perch.

The bird let out a screech and flung its wings wide. Lightning flashed in a crackling burst that seemed to hit Keph from every angle at once, lifting him off his feet even as it knocked him across the floor to crash into tall stools set before one of the other tables. Brilliant flashes lit his vision—for a moment it seemed as if he couldn't close his eyes. His hair stood on end. The sweat that had soaked his clothes puffed away into rank steam.

The falcon's eyes, glowing bright blue, were fixed on him. Keph ground his teeth. He couldn't hide from the bird. He couldn't get past it. How was he supposed to deal with something that was faster than he was?

The same way Lyraene and the Sharrans had dealt with Quick: brute force. Attack the weapon, not the wielder. His hand closed on the leg of one of the stools. It was good, heavy wood. The seat of the stool was even heavier.

Keph surged to his feet and charged at the falcon, stool raised.

Lightning crashed against him, another thin, stinging stream. Keph sucked in his breath at the pain, but didn't stop. The falcon screeched again, spreading its wings. Before it could unleash another powerful burst, he twisted around and swung the stool with all of his strength and weight.

The heavy wood smashed into the bird with a crunch and

swept it off its perch. It hurtled across the room to crash against the far wall with a metallic clatter. Keph darted after it. One wing bent back, its entire side bashed in, the thing lay on its back, struggling to right itself. Lightning crackled in wild arcs across its battered copper
feathers. Keph spun the stool around in his grip. Holding it upside-down by two legs, he drove the broad wooden seat down against the construct.
Metal crumpled and screeched. He hit the bird again. Blue sparks spurted out in a final cascade. Keph lifted the stool and peered underneath. The falcon lay against the floor like a broken toy. It wasn't moving.
Keph dropped the stool and staggered to the table with the coins and the silk-swathed object. He reached out and twitched the silk aside.
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Shouts and screams echoed through Moonshadow Hall as Feena, most of her weight on Julith's shoulders, stumbled out into the cloisters. An acolyte racing through the cloisters nearly ran them down.
"What news?" Julith asked.
"There's no sign of the guard yet," the girl replied, gasping for breath. Her voice was very nearly hysterical. "There's something happening over in the Stiltways!"
"A distraction," groaned Feena with dreadful certainty. The guard would go there first, trusting thick walls and Selune's might to give Moonshadow Hall a chance to hold out on its own for a time. "No help from the guard."
"Carry that message, girl!" Julith said. "We must have faith in Selune. Let all her servants hold their ground."
The acolyte plunged on along the cloisters. Julith twisted her head around and Feena caught fear in her eyes.
"Are you sure about this, Feena?" she asked. "Yes," said Feena.
Her head was swimming. Her vision was blurred and fading. Her legs felt numb, cold, and heavy. She knew that if she

looked back the way she and Julith had come—if she'd been able to look back—she would have seen a steady trail of bright red blood. She needed more than healing. Tyver had given her a clue.

"Do you know what will happen?" whispered Julith.

Feena managed a grin and said, "No."

A shudder wracked her. She didn't even have the strength to cough anymore. Her throat felt like it was filling with blood again. Julith turned away, her face grim.

"Ready, then?" she asked. "Last few paces."

Feena's heart fluttered with agony as they staggered together across the cloister and through the gate of the waning crescent. Moonlight, the last of her spell, still sparkled on the grass of the courtyard. More light winked in and out above, conjured by Selunites only to be blotted out by shadows called by the Sharrans—by Variance or Bolan.

Feena could make out arrows and stones littering the ground. At least some of the Sharrans' attacks had reached over the temple walls. The sacred space of the courtyard was empty of other people, though—Moonshadow Hall's defenders had other places to be.

The book of the New Moon Pact lay close to the blood-darkened grass where Mifano had fallen. Had Chandri's prayers rescued the silver-haired priest? Feena couldn't ask the question.

"Hurry, Julith," she breathed. She tried to point to the pool, but her free arm just flailed loosely. "Beside the pool."

The dark-haired priestess dragged her over and lowered her down beside the ancient stone wall around the pool, then raced to snatch up the abandoned book.

"What now, Feena?" she asked.

Feena prayed that her next guess was correct. "The first page," she rasped. "There's a rite..."

Julith opened the book and scanned the page. Stepping into the brightest of the light that shone from above, she raised the ancient text and read aloud.

"What time has consumed, not even gods can recall, but know this—these words were spoken by those who first made pact with the Moonmaiden, just as they were spoken by the last. This is the sacred rite of the New Moon." Her voice rose. "Selune, Moonmaiden, Silver Lady of the Night, hear me!"
"Hear me..." echoed Feena. The words were weak and faltering. She reached up and groped for the stone wall, dragging herself upright with trembling arms. "Selune," she prayed with all the strength she could force out of her battered body, "Moonmaiden, Silver Lady of the Night, hear me!"
"I have roamed in darkness—"
"I have roamed in darkness," repeated Feena. The words tore at her throat, but she forced them out anyway, speaking them as Julith read from the book.
"Shadows hold no fear for me. Under your light I have run the moon's road. I have known your bright faces: joy, strength, and wisdom. For your sake, I have held death itself at bay, but the Ancient Knight is swift—"
Up on the rooftops, there was a wail of pain. It ended sharply. Outside, Sharrans cheered. There was a hiss and patter like rain as arrows came falling out of the sky. Shouts from above heralded the reaction of Selune's faithful. Slings hummed and the shower of arrows came to an abrupt end. Julith's voice broke and she huddled down, but kept reading.
"—and I must be swifter!"
The hair on Feena's neck rose. Under the blood that stiffened her robes and caked her arms, she could feel her skin tingling. She heaved with weakened arms and numbed legs. The words were the oath of a warrior and she would not speak them sitting down. Bracing herself against the stones of the wall, she rose into a crouch. Her head spun, but she stayed up and the words poured out of her.
"By blood spilled, by my faith, give me your blessing and I shall be yours. I will strike down your enemies. I will be your

claws and your teeth. Where darkness lies, I will be the unseen shield that defends the children of both sun and moon. Where they have fallen, I will make silent vengeance that no more shall follow. Where shadow gathers, I will be the secret light that turns it aside."
She heard dull thunder and desperate screams. The Sharrans had turned some kind of battering ram against Moonshadow Hall's gates. Julith faltered, her voice almost fading away, but it seemed to Feena that she could hear the words of the oath in her heart, as if she had always known them both as a woman and as a wolf. She lifted her arm, reaching up toward the dark, shrouded sky. Her legs straightened. For a moment, she stood tall, ignoring the pain that stroked up and down her spine and the crippling ache that throbbed in her head.
"Selune, make pact with me for I have seen your hidden face! Between light and light, the new moon guards the night! Selune, make—"
Her vision faded. Her balance pitched.
"-pact-"
"Feena!" screamed Julith.
She caught her breath, struggled to force the last words out: "—with—"
She was falling. She twisted, trying to find her balance once more, but something pushed at her legs—the ancient stone wall—and she toppled over. Cool water closed around her. Air burst out of her tortured lungs and Feena choked on water. Her throat burned. One last bubble of air pushed through her mouth. Her lips shaped it with dreamlike hesitation, —me.
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Black as Shar's own darkness. A double handspan wide and high. As thick as four fingers held together. Tiles of slate as thin as fine porcelain and marked on the front with silver writing that Keph's mind refused to recognize. Hinged like a book, Variance had said, but in truth not so much hinged as

caught along one side in an arrangement of silver rods and clasps that bore a resemblance to both a cage and the setting of an elaborate piece of jewelry.
Keph stared at the book. No wonder it had so completely fascinated his father. No wonder Variance should want it. He swallowed.
"Guide me through this, Selune," he muttered, "and you have my service!"
He reached down and picked up the book.
The instant his fingers closed on the slates, a dark force pulsed through him like a dragon's roar.
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Variance gasped and staggered as the call that had tugged at her for more than a month faded. Bolan whirled.
"Mother Night, are you well?"
"Better," Variance breathed. Keph had The Leaves of One Night. She called out to the nearest shadow mastiff. "Seek the man who stood with me when I summoned you," she commanded the creature, pointing in the direction of Fourstaves House. "That way. Escort him to me!"
The beast growled and loped off. Variance drew a deep breath.
"Now, Bolan," she said, "we unleash our worst." She reached to her side and drew her chakram from her belt. "Mistress of the Night," she called, thrusting it high, "drive ice into the hearts of your faithful and let Moonshadow Hall be brought low!"
All around her, shadow mastiffs lifted their savage muzzles and let out a howl as terrible as night itself.

## CHAPTER 17

The force within the black slates hammered at Keph like pounding waves driven before a storm. He gasped and staggered—but didn't let go. Strasus hadn't described the dark force and Keph knew his father would have! The old man thought of the book as some curiosity, some ancient artifact and nothing more.

"I spoke no lie when I said you had the potential to become one of Shar's priests," Variance had said. Was the power of the book something that reacted only to the potential of divine magic? Was it possible that even a wizard as powerful in the Art as Strasus Thingoleir had not felt the tide of darkness?

There were whispers within the darkness as well: slow, low, and powerful. He felt like he could almost make out the words within them—almost, but not quite. He strained and tried to catch what the whispers were saying. They swirled around
him, a whirlpool that threatened to pull him under, to swallow him whole...

Almost like Variance's attempt to alter his memories. He clenched his teeth and thrust back against the whispers just as he had thrust back against the dark priestess.

"Get out!" he hissed. "Get out! I'm not listening to you!"

The force surged. It probed. He flung it back with all the strength of his will.

It retreated. Keph stood still and stared down at the book. It seemed heavier in his hands. His breath came in short gulps once more.

Another questing tendril of force caressed the edges of his mind. He slapped it away, then turned and stumbled out of Strasus's study. Carrying the book was like carrying a tub of water, a weight that shifted constantly and threatened to splash free at any time. Keph held it as close as he dared and made his way slowly back down the corridor of the north wing. He could feel the wards again. Instead of tugging at him, though, it was almost as if they brushed against him then shrank back like hair singed by a candle flame. Whispers swirled.

"No," he growled.

"Master Keph!"

Halfway up the grand staircase, the underbutler he'd encountered before stood and stared at him. There were

other servants too, all in various stages of preparing for bed. Down in the entrance hall, the head butler, dressed in a night robe, was just emerging from the passage that led back to the servants' quarters. Some of the men were armed with knives and short swords. All of the servants were staring at him. Keph froze.
The fight with the copper falcon... how far had the sounds carried in the silent mansion?
"Stay back," Keph snarled.
"Sir," the head butler called, "what are you doing?" "I'm fixing a mistake," Keph answered. He took a slow step forward. "Get out of my way."
The underbutler already on the stairs started to retreat back down them, but the head butler moved forward and began to climb.
"That book is from your father's study. I can't let you-"
"I said get out of my way!" roared Keph.
Maybe some of the dark force of the slates had wormed its way deeper into him than he had thought. The head butler turned pale and stopped. The underbutler actually choked, pressing himself so far back against the banister that for a moment Keph thought he might fall over. All the other servants cleared away from the bottom of the stairs.
Keph tightened his grip on the book of slates and marched down the staircase. When he reached the bottom and turned to the doors, the servants parted to make an aisle for him. The entrance hall was deathly quiet.
When he opened the doors, though, sound rushed in. Yhaunn's night was alive with distant cries and screams. Many of them came from the direction of the Stiltways. Keph tottered forward. Strasus's wards had been designed to keep people out of Fourstaves House, not in. The green lines of magic that flared briefly as he walked out shimmered and shriveled just as the wards in the north wing had. The stone dogs actually cowered away from him.
Whispers crashed inside his head once more, and Keph let

them crash, holding them at bay rather than thrusting them back. Staggering like a drunk man wading in the surf, he jogged into the night toward Moonshadow Hall.

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Feena could hear howls. She could hear screams. She could hear Julith crying for her and the splashing as the young priestess reached into the water of the sacred pool—and a shout of surprise as she leaped back.

She heard all of it a fraction of a heartbeat before .dazzling moonlight burned away the haze that had

stolen her vision. Feena gasped—and in gasping, drew the moonlight into herself. Selune was inside her, burning in her flesh and blood, knitting her together, and making her whole. The touch of the goddess exploded through her. Feena threw back her head and howled— not out of pain, but out of sheer joy.

The wolf within her howled right along with the woman. And somewhere in the silver brilliance of Selune's light, Feena could hear a whole chorus of wolves and beasts raising their voices along with her.

The New Moon Pact was reborn!

Feena felt stone under her feet and kicked out. She shot up through the water and into the night, still howling. Shining water streamed from the fur of her hybrid form. She felt stronger and more alive than she ever had in her life. Everything seemed brighter and more vibrant. Growling with fierce ecstasy, she threw back her head and howled at the sky.

"Feena!"

She looked down—no, just across. Julith crouched beside the sacred pool and Feena stood within it. The water was no more than waist deep. But it had felt as though she had been so much deeper! She snarled in awe. There were things to be seen by moonlight—

She surged forward through the water and heaved herself out of the pool. Julith was still staring at her in amazement.

"How...?"
"Later, Julith," Feena said. "There's a battle-" "Feena, you're talking!"
She froze and reached up with tremendous, clawed hands to touch her face. A wolfs muzzle, a wolfs ears, a wolfs head, and yet—
"Moonmaiden's grace," Feena gasped. Her voice was deep and resonant, but she could speak just as well as she - could as a human. "Oh, Bright Lady of the Night!"
A chilling howl broke through her awe. Julith paled. Feena's head snapped around. One of the Sharrans' otherworldly dogs. The sounds of it raised the hair on her neck
and all the way down her spine. Up on the rooftop, she could see Selune's clerics scrambling back.
"Julith, gather anyone you can and arm yourselves. We're taking the fight to the Sharrans!"
She didn't wait for a reply. Powerful legs drove her across the courtyard. There was no time to rush through the twisted passages that led out onto the roof from inside the temple. In one bounding leap, she jumped up and caught the lowest windowsill in the wall above the covered cloisters. Muscles rippled under her fur as she drew herself up and braced her body in the window frame.
Her claws sank into the mortar between the stones of the frame. She looked at them with surprise, then bared her teeth and swung out from the window. Digging in with fingers and toes, she scaled the wall as easily as if it were nothing more than a steep bank of earth. Six feet... ten feet... twelve... and she was racing up the pitch of Moonshadow Hall's roof toward the high walkway. All along the parapet, the iron hooks of grapples shook as Sharrans scaled the outer walls while Selunite priestesses huddled against the edge of the walkway, driven back by the unnatural horror of the black dogs' howling. They shrieked and flinched as Feena vaulted onto the walkway.
Moonshadow Hall's defenders had been reduced to

frightened girls. Feena spread her hands. If she could speak in hybrid form, could she work magic as well?
"Selune be with us," she prayed. "Protect us from the terrors of the night!"
The Moonmaiden's magic swirled like a stirring song, blotting out the lingering echoes of the black dogs' howls. The priestesses gasped as renewed courage took hold of them.
"To arms, sisters!" Feena howled. "To arms!"
She whirled toward the parapet—just as the first Sharrans hurled themselves over the edge and onto the walkway in a frenzy of screaming madness.
If the sight of a werewolf startled them, they didn't show it. A surprisingly well-dressed young man flung himself at her.
"Beast!" he shrieked. "This is for Cyrume and Keph!"
He swung at her with a sword, but Feena blocked it with her arm. The blade sliced into her flesh—but without magic or silver behind it, the cut was no more than a sting. The young man's blow was unnaturally strong, though. She could almost smell the dark magic that clung to him. Growling, she caught his arm before he could swing again, then grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him in close.
"You fool!" she roared in his face. "Keph is my friend!"
The wolf in her bayed for blood, urged her to rake claws across the Sharran's flesh. She held back the savage instinct and punched instead. A jab rocked the Sharran's head back. A backhand twisted it around. If Keph could recognize the mistakes he had made and turn from Shar, maybe there was hope for the other cultists as well. When she released her grip, the young man slid down to sprawl across the walkway. Feena grabbed the next Sharran to come over the parapet and gave him the same.
Bolstered by Shar's magic, none of the cultists went down easily. Selune's faithful were better armed than the Sharrans, however. Inch by inch and blow by blow, the Sehlnites pressed them back toward the parapet—

—until a woman's voice rolled up from below, speaking a blasphemous prayer to the Lady of Loss.
The worst of the wounds the defenders had inflicted on the Sharrans vanished. The cultists surged forward with renewed vigor. Variance! It had to be the dark priestess.
Feena cursed and leaned out over the parapets, but could see nothing in the shadows below other than the black dogs. They paced and snarled, waiting for prey to come within reach. Feena howled at them and their snarling broke into a frenzy.
Farther along the curve of the wall, though, there was trouble. The battering ram she'd heard as she spoke the oath of the New Moon Pact was swinging again at the front gates. Its dull thunder echoed in the street. Feena wrenched one of the Sharrans' grappling hooks,
abandoned now, free of the parapet and charged along the walkway, rope trailing after her.
"Make way!" she shouted. "Make way!"
Another Sharran tried to stop her. She met him with a stiff arm that knocked him back off his feet and left him clutching his chest and choking. On the ground below, the black dogs shadowed her in a growing pack.
The walkway ended in a squat bell tower over the gates. The alarm bells that the acolytes had rung earlier as she lay dying in the kitchen were silent—a strong defense was better than a vain hope of rescue! Feena dived inside and peered out one of the high windows. Below her, manned by ten Sharrans, the battering ram swung against the gates hard enough to send vibrations all the way up to shiver through the pads of her feet.
At least it did until the black dogs that had pursued her came bounding around the walls. The ram crashed to the ground as the cultists scattered in shock. Teeth bared, Feena set the grappling hook against the stone of the windowsill and tossed the rope out the window, then grasped it firmly and swung out herself. The dogs howled and scrapped under

her like puppies begging for a dangling sausage. Feena counted five of them.
Ten feet up from the ground, she pushed away from the Wall, swinging herself out. The black dogs followed her, ugly heads swiveling and spinning. A couple of them darted after her. Feena's swing slowed and stopped as it reached the end of its arc, then started back down.
She let go of the rope and aimed straight at the ugliest of the dogs. It had time to stare at her in alarm before her full weight slammed into it. The beast went down with a yelp of surprise. The other dogs only hesitated for a heartbeat before closing on her in a frenzy of claws and teeth.
Feena's teeth were at least as big. Her claws were bigger. And because the dogs had no hope of redemption, she had no regret in letting loose all of the pent-up savagery of the wolf within her.
She tore into the first dog to come within reach, her claws shredding its slick black hide. The dog's flesh
was cold and dark—where light fell on its wounds, black blood hissed away like mist before a flame. A dank smell reached her nose. Shadowstuff. The black dogs had been summoned out of pure darkness.
When she hooked out the first dog's throat with her claws, its body faded into darkness as well. A hard kick smashed the ribs of the struggling dog she'd brought down with her leap. A third dog darted in to rip at her legs. Feena tore down blindly with her claws and took an ear, but the dog's teeth caught her arm. She howled in pain. Unlike the Sharrans' weapons, the dogs' unnatural teeth could hurt her. She lashed at the clinging dog with her free hand, tearing long strips of dark flesh from its side until it released her.
The last two dogs seized the moment to dart in at her. Feena whirled on them—and dropped to all fours, changing into a wolf as easily as she had in her dream of the New Moon Pact. Another gift from Selune! Caught off guard, the darting dogs hesitated. Feena leaped at one, growling and bristling. It

cringed back—and she spun to the other, seizing its massive neck in her powerful jaws and wrenching hard. It staggered and shook her off, but it was bleeding shadowstuff, darkness drifting from its wounds and fading away. Feena backed off. The dog with the torn ear slunk in to join its packmates. Low snarls seething from out of their throats, all three paced forward. The outer two moved to flank her.

Feena leaped past them, straight at the dog in the center, the only one she hadn't injured yet. It reared up to meet her charge, but her weight was greater and she bowled the beast over onto its back.

One fast snap of her jaws around its throat sent it back into Shadow, but another dog leaped onto her back. Feena felt jaws closing, trying to find purchase on her neck. She twisted around, willing a change as she moved. Her wide, clawed hands caught the thing's jaws. She jerked them sharply to the side. The dog shuddered, died, and vanished.

The last dog, the one with the savaged throat, shrank
back with its tail between its legs as she rose. Feena stalked toward it, growling and flexing her hands. The dog whimpered—then lunged. Feena spun out of its way and raked it deeply with her claws as it passed. It landed, spun around, and managed one last growl before it collapsed and vanished as well.

The mutter of human voices brought her around. On the far side of the abandoned battering ram, the Sharrans who had manned it stood clenched together in a frightened little pack of their own. Standing at their head, however, was a man with an eerily stiff and flawless face: Bolan!

"You've beaten shadow mastiffs, Selunite," he called, "but do you think you can take Shar's faithful?"

The Sharrans managed a weak rattling of weapons. Bolan scarcely seemed to notice. By his voice and the eyes that glared out from his unmoving face, he was half mad. Ceramic flasks and little pouches hung from a harness that crisscrossed his chest. The metallic stink of alchemy drifted

off him. Feena dropped down into a defensive crouch. Bolan reached up to his harness with both hands and plucked off flasks.

"Specially created for Selunites," he said, "and for werewolves. Powdered silver ground into alchemist's fire!"

Feena growled. The other Sharrans flinched back, but Bolan stepped forward.

"Untested, it's true—but I've had so little opportunity." His arms swept back, ready to throw the flasks. "You'll be the first to experience my creation!"

"No!"

To the side of them, the doors of Moonshadow Hall swung open. Julith stood between them, a helmet on her head, a shield on her arm, and a mace at her side. Selune's symbol was in her hand.

"By the Moonmaiden," she shouted, "she shall not!"

Feena smelled the clean white breeze of the moon goddess's magic as it roared between priestess and dark priest. The flasks in Bolan's hands—all of the flasks that festooned his chest—shattered in a cascade of quiet popping noises. Feena saw an instant of horror in his eyes,

Then the gooey liquid that coated his hands erupted into white flame. His chest burst into flame as well—or at least those patches of it that didn't steam with acid or melt under the bite of vile poisons. Pouches caught fire and flared up in thick, greasy smoke. Bolan screamed in agony, whirling around and around.

"Shar, have mercy! Mistress of the Night, save me!"

The cultists leaped away from him as he danced. Smoke and flame spun a trail behind him.

"No! No! No—"

Something burst and burned in a puff of deep violet flame. Bolan gasped and choked on it, then clutched at his throat with blazing hands. He staggered once more and pitched over onto his back.

The Sharrans—and Feena—stared as the mingled fires of a

dozen alchemical preparations consumed the fallen priest.
But the defenders of Moonshadow Hall were rushing through the gates, clergy and acolytes armed for battle and with prayers on their lips. A few of the cultists scattered with Selune's followers in pursuit. The others were surrounded in a matter of moments.
"Feena, we've won!" called Julith. The dark-haired priestess strode across the abandoned battering ram like the Moonmaiden's own warrior. "The Sharrans who reached the roof are dead or captured. We've won!"
"No," Feena growled. "There's one more Sharran to find." She held up her hand and roared, "A mace! Someone give me a mace!"
A priestess spun and tossed one to her. Feena snatched the weapon out of the air. The blessing of Selune clung to it. She growled in satisfaction.
"Stay close," she ordered Julith. "We need to find Variance."
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There was a growl from the shadows ahead. Keph froze in alarm as one of the shadow mastiffs seemed to detach itself from the darkness. It paced toward him, growling.
"You... you stay back!" he said.
The mastiff didn't stop. Keph felt sweat run cold down the sides of his face. His arms ached from the strange weight of the book of black slates. His head pulsed with the effort of resisting its dark force and the mad whispers within. Moonshadow Hall was close. He could see the steady glow of magical moonlight above the intervening buildings—the priestesses had all but lit up the night.
He was so close to being done with Variance, too, so close to giving her the cursed book. He tried moving to the side of the street but the shadow mastiff matched his movements.
"What is it?" Keph demanded. "What do you want?" He held out the book. "Look—I'm on Variance's business. Leave me alone!"
He'd seen Variance speak freely to the beasts, but the

mastiff gave no sign of having understood him. It crouched low, moving closer, but at an angle that forced Keph to step away from the wall if he wanted to keep his distance from the beast. Its growl was deep and menacing. Keph twisted around, walking backward so he could keep an eye on it.
"Stay back," he repeated.
He juggled the book into his left hand so he could reach for Quick with his right... instinct again. The Selunites still had the damned rapier! He gasped out a curse and brandished the book like a shield.
The shadow mastiff darted forward.
Keph yelped and thrust out the book.
"Get back!" he yelled-
Except that the words that emerged from his lips weren't his. With a sudden, hideous rush, the whispers of the book came together, blasting through the weakness of his fear to tear across his soul, and out of his mouth. Keph shouted words that grated on his ears for a fleeting moment before vanishing like bad dreams.
The shadow mastiff let out a howling wail as its body smeared out against the darkness and evaporated into a wisp of dark smoke.
Burning pain seared through Keph's hand. With a howl of his own, he tossed the book back into his right hand and stared at his left. A silvery character branded his thumb—one of the characters from the black slates. He stared at it then at the book.
It seemed lighter than it had moments before. The whispers had receded slightly in his head.
He swallowed hard.
"Variance!"
Feena stalked around to the east side of Moonshadow Hall. If Bolan had commanded the attack on the temple's south, it made sense that Variance should have commanded the attack from the east. When Feena fought the Sharrans on the rooftop, that had been the direction the dark priestess's

prayers had come from as well.
"Variance!" she roared again. "Come out!"
Behind her, Julith raced to keep up. Feena moved just slowly enough to allow her the chance to keep pace. Prayers of moonlight overhead cast bright, colorless pools down onto the streets and alleys around the temple walls—but in the shadows between buildings, darkness lay deep. Feena stopped and spun around, her arms raised.
"Variance, come out! I know you're here!"
A sudden whiff of shadowstuff, much like the mastiffs, caught her nose. She whirled.
Shadows parted down a side street and a tall Calishite woman stepped into a patch of moonlight. Dusky pale skin, plain black clothes, long dark hair... the only color about Variance was the purple wink of the amethyst ring on one finger.
Though she held the sharp steel ring of a chakram in her right hand casually, her eyes were intense.
"Your continued interference is unexpected and unwelcome."
"So was your attempt to turn Yhaunn against me by sending a shadow mastiff to mutilate Cyrume's body."
Variance's eyebrows rose slightly and she said, "You guessed."
"With Keph's help." Feena jerked her head at Julith and the younger priestess nodded. She slipped down the side street, keeping wide around to one side of Variance. Feena began to circle the other way. "Where is Keph? What have you done with him?"
"He's performing a special service for Shar."
"You lie," Feena growled. "You kidnapped him. He wouldn't help you or Shar."
Variance's gaze flickered to Julith, then settled back on Feena. "You've broken my enchantment as well, then. You are extraordinary. You speak as a beast. And I saw you fight the shadow mastiffs—your form flows like water. Selune's

touch is strong upon you." Her eyes narrowed. "New Moon?" she asked.
Feena caught her breath and growled, "How do you know about the New Moon Pact?"
Variance laughed and said, "Shar's archives hold many secrets—especially the lore of her enemies. And the New Moon Pact is an old enemy to the Mistress of the Night. It was old when Netheril fell." Feena caught the subtle movement as she tensed. "Your defeat will be a pleasure."
"You're already defeated, Variance," called Julith. "Your cultists are captured. Your beasts are gone."
"Girl," Variance hissed without turning around, "do you expect me to surrender to you? To seek absolution from your cold goddess? Or perhaps you think I'll flee and you can avoid a fight." She caught Feena's gaze. "Do you want that, Feena?"
Feena's hands tightened on the metal shaft of the mace.
Variance smiled and said, "I didn't think so."
She spun to spit a single, bleak word at Julith. The
young priestess screamed and staggered back, her eyes wide.
"Feena! I can't see!"
Even as Julith screamed, Variance was twisting back to Feena. Her arm flicked sharply and her chakram sliced through the air.
Feena snapped up the mace and swung hard. It connected with the chakram, sending it ricocheting away. Letting loose a howl, Feena charged at Variance. Shar's priestess just reached up to snatch the chakram out of the air as it hissed by, then stepped back into the shadows.
When Feena's mace thundered through the darkness, there was nothing there. The weapon swept empty air. Variance was gone.
No, Feena knew. Not gone. Her words had been cold. She wanted a fight. At the very least, she had no intention of leaving. Feena spun around.

"Julith!" she ordered. "Stay still and keep low!"
Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Julith grope for the nearest wall then sink down, her shield pulled up high for protection. Feena turned and turned again—then spun around as prayer welled out of another shadow.
Variance's hand stiffened and thrust toward her. Darkness lanced from her fingertips. Feena howled as the black bolt pierced her flesh like despair given form. She staggered under the foul magic, but forced herself to her feet and charged again.
Variance unleashed a second bolt, then flung her chakram as well. Feena flung herself into a long roll across the ground. Both magic and steel passed above her and she rolled back to her knees before Variance, swinging the mace in a flawless, powerful continuation of motion.
The dark priestess stepped back into the shadows less than a heartbeat before the mace would have hammered into her. Feena's mighty swing carried her around and left her sprawling. Variance's chakram hit the wall above her and fell to the ground with a ringing clatter. Feena rolled away from it and flipped herself back up onto her feet, mace ready again.
"Stand and fight!" Feena screamed. "No."
Movement in a shadow.... Feena spun, and another black bolt of despair caught her full in the chest. The pain seemed even worse, stealing her breath and leaving her doubled over.
Soft footsteps fell on the stones of the street. Feena forced herself upright as Variance stepped out into the light once more. Feena raised her mace and met the Sharran's dark gaze. Slowly, silently, they moved against each other, keeping their distance.
Halfway between them, Julith shuddered in the silence.
"Feena, what's going on?" she gasped.
Variance's gaze flickered toward her.
"No!" growled Feena.

Variance just smiled and took another step—into a patch of shadow.
The darkness swallowed her.
"No!" Feena howled and spun around. "Moonmaiden guide me, where is—"
A whiff of shadowstuff. Feena whirled, and hurled her mace into shadows not three paces from Julith.
It slammed into Variance's shoulder. She grunted and stumbled, twisted around by the impact. Feena growled and rushed at her, powerful legs pumping then kicking her into a leap. She hit Variance in a hard tackle that sent them both tumbling along the street. Feena snapped and tore at the dark priestess, but Variance was unexpectedly strong. She caught Feena's clawed hands in her own and forced them back. Her legs came up, threatening a double kick. Feena thrust herself back.
Variance stayed close. The black and purple disk of the Mistress of the Night was clenched in one hand and she shouted a prayer as her other hand darted out to touch Feena.
"Shar take you!"
Darkness closed on Feena's heart like the fist of doom. She couldn't breathe. No, she wasn't breathing. Agony tore through her, cold so bitter it burned. Shar's magic
was killing her, dragging her from life into death—
Feena forced a snarl through clenched teeth. "For Selune's sake, I have held death itself at bay." Her eyes snapped open to stare at Variance. "For Selune's sake, I deny death!"
The dark prayer shattered, leaving both priestesses reeling, Variance with an expression of shock on her pale face, Feena trembling with the memory of pain. Gasping and panting, they faced each other. Feena's claws spread wide. Variance's fists clenched tight.
"Stop!"
Variance froze, then turned and looked up. Feena turned as well. Higher up on the slope of the street, stood Keph

Thingoleir. The young man's face was flushed and his clothes and hair were drenched in sweat. His entire body trembled, but he held his arms high above his head.
Clutched in his hands and seeming to shimmer as moonlight fell upon it was a strange black book. Keph took a slow step forward, passing out of moonlight and into shadow and the book seemed to change, silver sparks of writing emerging upon it.
The very sight of that book set Feena's teeth on edge. A tremor of unease writhed through her gut.
"Keph..." she growled in a low voice.
Variance stepped away from her and held out her hands.
"Give it to me!" the Sharran ordered. Keph didn't move.
Variance's face tensed and she shouted, "Give it to me!"
"Feena," Keph asked, his voice cracking, "is Moon-shadow Hall safe?"
Feena nodded, and Keph lowered the book and looked at Variance.
"Call off the creatures in the Stiltways," he told her. "Rax leads them now." "Then call off Rax! End this!"
Variance's eyes narrowed, but she raised her voice.
"Rax!" she called into the night. "Rax, your task is done. Take your pack and return to Shadow."
The savage howls that had been echoing from the Stiltways vanished.
Variance looked at Keph and said, "Now give me the tiles!"
"No." Keph's flushed face was hard. "Now take off your ring."
Variance hissed.
Behind Keph, shadows shifted.
"Keph!" yelled Feena in warning as two more shadow mastiffs stepped out of the darkness.
She started to leap forward, but Keph was already whirling himself. Grasping the book in his right hand he poked his left thumb out at the nearest mastiff and shouted... something. The words tore at Feena's wolf ears and left them flat against her head. Even Variance gasped. The shadow

mastiff howled in terror and seemed to bleed away into nothingness. Snapping his arm around, Keph pointed at the second beast, repeating the tearing words.
It vanished as well, though its whine of fear lingered in the night. Keph looked back down at Variance.
"Take off the ring!" he commanded. "Give it to Feena!"
Eyes fixed on Keph, Variance brought her hands together and pulled the amethyst ring off her finger.
Feena's fur rose at the transformation that swept over the priestess. Fine, narrow Calishite features vanished, replaced by a broader, rounder face. Dusky pale skin turned dark... darker... black like night. Even Variance's eyes turned black, becoming deep, colorless pits of shadow. Her hair and clothes didn't shift, but when she spoke, her voice had a strange, ancient accent.
"Take it, Selunite," she snarled. "Wear it if you dare."
Feena reached over and snatched the ring from her fingers, holding it gingerly. The smell of shadowstuff was very strong.
"Now," Keph said, "get out of Yhaunn."
Variance's altered face twisted. "We had an agreement!"
she said. "The tiles for your friend's life. If you break that agreement, I swear that he will not be the only one to suffer!"
"What good is fixing one mistake if I make another?" Keph replied. He paused for a moment then looked down at the book in his hands. "I hear whispers in the dark, Variance. Whispers from the slates. I don't understand them, but I hear them." He looked up and raised his thumb. Silver glimmered on the pad of it. "The whispers did this and you know what I can do with it." His eyes
hardened. "What would happen ifl started repeating the whispers? Started speaking them out loud?" Feena's heart went cold.
Whispers in the dark... whispers that could be heard, but not understood. She'd heard those whispers. Dhauna Myritar

had heard them as well.
Selune's warning, the truth of it, the New Moon Heresy, the New Moon Pact—clues, tools, nothing more—stones on the path to that moment.
Feena stepped forward numbly, letting her hybrid form fall away so that she stood in the form of a woman. She felt as if she were on the edge of a cliff that could crumble under her feet at any minute.
"Keph," she said, "don't do it. Whatever you want, whatever you're thinking, don't speak the whispers."
Keph looked at her. His eyes were shot through with red. His face was tired.
"Feena," he said, "you don't understand..."
"Keph, you have to trust me," Feena replied. "For your family's sake, believe me. Some things should never be spoken. The whispers must not be spoken."
"She understands better than you do," said Variance. The dark priestess took a slow step forward as well. "And she's right. In Shar's name, I swear it. Your friend will be safe. I will leave Yhaunn. Just give me the book and I will lock it away."
Keph's face tightened and he asked, "What if I give it to Feena and she locks it away?"
Variance stiffened. "Give it me. It's no weapon."
"Then what is it?"
Variance hesitated, then took another step forward as she said, "It-"
Out of the corner of her eyes, Feena saw moonlight fade from the dark priestess's face as she moved into a shadow. Her gut leaped.
"Keph, look out!" she shouted.
Too late. Shadows folded around Variance—and unfolded behind Keph. In less than a breath, Variance had stepped between shadows like a piece of living darkness. Her hands closed on the book and wrenched it out of Keph's grasp.
"—belongs to Shar!" she cried triumphantly, stepping back and clenching the book.

Feena's stomach twisted in rage.
"Here's something else that belongs to Shar, then!" she howled.
Variance's chakram lay only feet away. Lunging, Feena swept it up. Her form changed with her anger and the arm that hurled the disk was furred and knotted with muscle. Razor-sharp steel screamed through the air just as shadows wove around Variance.
Shar's priestess gasped, staggered—and vanished. The scream of steel ended abruptly in a ringing screech. The chakram quivered in the stone wall behind the spot Variance had stood.
Keph stared in shock and asked, "Is she gone?"
Feena stalked up to the chakram and wrenched it out of the stone. Blood was smeared across it, pasting strands of long, dark hair to the metal.
"Yes," she snarled. "This time, I think she is."
"And the book?" he asked. "What about the book?"
Feena scanned the shadows. They were empty.

## CHAPTER 18

“Astounding," Strasus Thingoleir said as he poked at the silver character branded onto Keph's thumb. In the light of morning, it shone almost as bright as the reflections that flashed off the surface of Selune's sacred pool. "No pain?"
Keph shook his head. Strasus poked at the character again. "A sign of abjuration, I'm certain of it. Wouldn't you agree, High Moonmistress?"
The old wizard looked up. Feena shot a glance to Julith—Variance's spell of blindness had been broken by Selune's power—over Strasus's and Keph's heads. The four of them had gathered in the courtyard of Moonshadow Hall. The younger priestess gave a slight nod.
"Yes, Strasus," Feena answered. "I believe you're right."
"But you know nothing about the book of slates or Variance's interest in it?" Strasus asked, poking Keph's thumb again.

"No," replied Feena.
"It's a shame the book was lost," the wizard mused.
"A shame," Feena agreed. In a way, it was a lie. She felt as though a tremendous weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Selune hadn't been concerned by the book-only by what Keph might have unknowingly done with it. It seemed to her that Moonmaiden was just as happy to see the book in Variance's hands. "I wish we knew more about who or what Variance was, though."
"I believe I can tell you the 'what,' High Moonmistress." Strasus gave her a serious look. "From your description of her abilities and appearance, I would guess that she was a shade, once a human and now a creature of Shadow." With his free hand he slipped the amethyst ring from a pouch. Feena and Julith had both agreed the wizard would be the best person to keep the ring safe. "This bauble is likewise a creation of Shadow. Given its apparent abilities, I sincerely doubt that Variance came from the Temple of Old Night. Note the design of the ring—it's Netherese. And Variance referred to the fall of Netheril, didn't she? I believe she may have been a very powerful sort of shade—one from the floating city of the same name." Strasus made the ring disappear back into his pouch. "All the more reason, I think, for learning all we can of this book."
Julith said, "We are beginning a search of our archives for references to the book, sir. Something might still turn up. Anything you could tell us about your own studies of it would be very helpful."
Strasus turned his gaze on her and replied, "Of course, mistress." His eyes sparkled. "Have we met before? And if we have, why haven't I noticed your rather considerable intelligence?"
"Julith has been hiding in other peoples' shadows," Feena said with a smile. "I think you'll be seeing more of her, though."
"Much like your remarkable archives, I think. I had no idea

such a resource existed. It's fortunate it wasn't damaged during the attack. Astounding...."
He looked up at Moonshadow Hall's highest floor and absently poked Keph's thumb once more.
"Enough," Keph snapped. He pulled his hand away. "Do that again and I'll use it on you."
Strasus's face faltered. A moment later, so did Keph's. Feena and Julith exchanged a glance in silence. After the defeat of the Sharrans and the disappearance of the shadow mastiffs that had menaced the Stiltways, it hadn't taken long for Strasus Thingoleir to come looking for his son. Though Moonshadow Hall had suffered its own losses—Sharrans had injured a number of clergy and three priestesses had lost their lives—Feena had immediately offered the temple as neutral ground for a reconciliation between father and son. She had stood by Keph as he poured out his tale.
And Strasus had proven himself a loving father as well as a great wizard, sweeping Keph into a tearful embrace and offering him his forgiveness and support.
Not that there wasn't still tension between them. Keph's hand shook and fell down.
"Sorry," he said.
Strasus drew a slow breath. "Not to worry," he said with a credible attempt at levity. "I suspect it will only affect creatures summoned to our world by magic." He spread his arms. "You're welcome to test the theory."
Keph kept his hand at his side, but gave his father a thin smile. "Another time maybe."
An acolyte, a long bandage covering a wound on her arm, came hurrying acrpss the grass.
"Your pardon, High Moonmistress," she said. "There's word from Guard Captain Manas. They found the Sharran temple and Jarull Cartcoster has been rescued. The captain also sends his respects to you."
Feena flushed, but managed to keep control over her voice. "Thank you." Ignoring Julith's smile, she turned to Keph and

Strasus and continued, "I've spoken to the high priest of Ilmater. He'll take Jarull in. His temple has experience in treating victims of torture."
Strasus bowed and said, "Thank you." He gestured
and his staff rose from the ground to float into his hand. He nodded to both Feena and Julith. "I must go. Jarull's mother should hear the news from me."
Keph cleared his throat and said, "I should come with you."
Strasus shook his head. "Not yet, Keph. It's a commendable sentiment, but it's too soon. Give Hane some time." He touched Keph's shoulder and added, "You'll have enough to face you at Fourstaves House. Wait for me here. We'll go home together."
Keph nodded, biting his lip as Strasus turned and walked out of the courtyard.
Feena put her arm around him. "You did the right thing last night," she said. "You fought for your family and friends."
"If I'd done the right thing in the first place, I wouldn't have had to."
Feena drew him across the courtyard to the flashing water of the sacred pool. Julith paced after them.
"If I'd come to Moonshadow Hall when Dhauna Myritar first called me," she told him, "she might not have gone mad and we might have unraveled Selune's warning much earlier. But if she hadn't forced me to attack her, I might not have met you at the gates. Every choice leads to another path. We can learn from where we've been, but we can't go back."
Keph turned a sour eye on her and commented, "You sound more like a priestess every time we talk."
"I know," Feena said, wrinkling her nose.
"What will happen to the Sharrans?"
"The guard has taken them into custody," said Julith. "Those who want to repudiate the Dark Goddess will be given the chance. Those who don't will face the law of Yhaunn for any crimes they've committed. We're fortunate there were no deaths in the Stiltways. We have your family to thank for

that, Keph."
"Oh, yes," Keph grunted, "the wizards of Fourstaves House—always heroes."
"The wizards aren't the only heroes of Fourstaves House," said Feena, squeezing the young man's shoulders. She turned him loose. "I think there's something you should have." She ran over to the cloisters and reached through an arched gate to retrieve a cloth-wrapped bundle she had left there earlier, then returned to the pool. "This is yours."
She shook loose the wrappings. Keph's eyebrows rose at the sight of his rapier.
"Quick!"
"I spoke to Mifano this morning," Feena said. "He's still recovering from Velsinore's attack. He told me where to find it and also asked me to pass on his apologies ... and his admiration."
"I wish people would stop saying that," Keph said with genuine shame. "I don't even want to stay in Yhaunn. I don't feel like I belong here anymore."
Feena nodded. "I know how you feel," she said. "I can't wait to get back to Arch Wood."
"Feena!" Julith cut in. "I thought we'd agreed—"
"I know," said Feena. "After Mother Dhauna and the others are laid to rest... a grand ceremony installing the new High Moonmistress." She bent down and scooped up a handful of water from the sacred pool, then pressed her wet fingers to Julith's forehead. "Julith Harkspur, you are a true priestess of Selune and by Selune's grace, I name you Moonmistress-Designate and my successor at Moonshadow Hall." She flicked the last of the water from her fingers. "The ceremony installing the new High Moonmistress will be for you. I resign."
Julith's eyes went wide. "Feena, you can't! Mifano should-"
"Mifano doesn't want the post. I spoke to him about that as well. He's too ashamed of being manipulated by Variance and of how he behaved toward me. I think you should let

him keep the Waxing Crescent though He's very good at that—he suggested holding Lady Monstaed's properties in trust until the guard can determine what Variance did with the real Lady Monstaed when she took her place."
Julith simply stared, speechless.
Feena patted her cheek and said, "You'll do fine, Julith. You know everything about Moonshadow Hall. You have compassion and determination. After the way you took charge last night, the clergy are already looking to you for leadership." She smiled at the young priestess. "What do you say?"
"I... I'll do my best." She drew a deep breath and continued, "It won't be that bad, I'm sure. Six hundred years ago, Moonshadow Hall survived a High Moonmistress who couldn't talk."
Feena blinked. "Asha the Silent?"
"Yes!" said Julith. "How did you know?"
"I'll make you a copy of The Book of the New Moon. But only if you do me a favor." Putting her arms around both Julith and Keph, she turned them toward the brick-filled arch that stood in for the new moon gate onto the courtyard. Feena lifted her chin. "Open that up. The New Moon Pact has been reborn."
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Variance sensed Rivalen Tanthul's presence as the high priest entered the archive chamber. She turned and bent her head in respect.
"Flame of Darkness," she whispered, "Singer after Twilight."
Rivalen bent his head as well, but his eyes stayed on her face.
"Vigilant sister," he said with a trace of awe. "What happened?"
Variance reached up and touched the long scar that cut across her right cheek and notched her ear.
"I was not sufficiently subtle," she said. "Shar writes her reprimand in my flesh."

"But you were successful."
He crossed the chamber to stand beside her. The Leaves of One Night rested on a cushion of black silk. The silver characters on the slates shimmered in the dimness. Rivalen examined them closely.
"They look like Netherese," he said, "but I can't read them."
"The script looks like all languages, Father Night," said Variance. "No one can read the text. The Leaves of One Night was cursed by Shar herself."
She opened the black wood doors of a cabinet and removed one of the many drawers within. Inside the drawer was a box of lead and dull gold. She took it out.
Rivalen looked at her and raised his eyebrows. "The Singer after Twilight commands you to speak, vigilant sister. It's time to give up some of your secrets. What do you know of The Leaves of One Night?"
"Only that and two things more," she said. "This is the first: touch the Leaves."
Rivalen extended a hand and rest it on the slates. He frowned and looked at Variance.
, "Speak a prayer to the Mistress of the Night," she told him.
His lips moved—and he gasped. Wonder filled his face.
"The whispers are like the tides of Shadow!" he said.
"No one can understand them either, also the work of Shar's curse. But legend says that the whispers are the words of the text. The Leaves of One Night are alive—alive and bound by the Lady of Loss."
Rivalen lifted his hand away from the Leaves and asked, "And the second thing?"
"Legends also say," Variance said, "that the text records Shar's only moment of weakness. She cursed the Leaves so no one would know it, even if it meant locking away all the other secrets of the Leaves as well—magic of ancient darkness so profound they have yet to be rediscovered."
The high priest breathed in then whispered, "These secrets —?"

Variance looked at him with narrowed eyes and said, "Inaccessible, Father Night. Unless you would work against the Lady of Loss herself."
Rivalen fell silent, then bowed his head. "As vou sav.
vigilant sister." He stepped back and asked, "Is Shar pleased with the return of The Leaves of One Night?"
"Shar is pleased, Father Night."
Opening the box, she picked up the slates and set them carefully inside, then closed the box and placed it back in the drawer. Rivalen's footsteps retreated back across the chamber. She felt his presence fade.
She hesitated, then opened the box once more and laid a hand on the cold slate.
"Praise be to Shar, the Mistress of the Night," she whispered.
The whispers of darkness filled her head. Secrets beyond measure. Incomprehensible. Inaccessible. Except...
Variance looked down at the first page of The Leaves of One Night, at a blank spot on the black slate. A spot that should have been filled with the single silver character that shone on the thumb of Keph Thingoleir.